

# Through Changing Eyes

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Summary: Empathy is lost in a universe devoid of understanding. Without expression, what can there be but confusion and hate? This world has only yet begun to heal from the scars of its past; a wound thick with prejudice and pain. A group with different sights, all seek a similar goal; some have been abused, others neglected, but they all want just one thing: to be the best they can be.

## 1. To get a piece of paper

(In this setting, a new device called a Pokespeak would allow communication between Pokemon and people through telepathic communication. It is not perfect, but it is so sought after that most trainers have it, although it is still in beta stages.)

I was sitting in class, scribbling notes for an upcoming exam. My last for high school. That sentiment tasted bittersweet; I would love leaving and exploring the Kanto region when I finished, but I would miss the teachers and classes. I really didn't have many school friends.

I felt a tug at my backpack, and a lazy stretch towards my consciousness.

[You awake back there?] I thought quietly towards my sleepy Pokemon. Static, my Pikachu, was resting in my backpack.

[   Do I need to get up?] He asked, thoughts blurred by his semiconscious mind.

[No. Class still has about half an hour left.]

[How much time is that?]

[30 minutes.] I still felt some confusion, so I put it in easier terms [The time it takes you to eat four or five apples.]

[Ok. I think I'll go back to sleep then.] He shuffled around in my backpack before getting comfortable. [Hey, Josh?]

[Yeah, Stat?] I answered.

[Why do you go to school?] He asked sleepily. I knew he would fall asleep before I gave him a real answer, so I simplified it.

[To get a piece of paper.] I smiled to myself.

[Why? It seems like a lot of work for a piece of paper. You're unhappy here, I can feel it. You like battling, and hanging with your friends outside of school. Why do you make yourself unhappy here, just to get a piece of paper?]

[It will help me get other pieces of paper later that are better and more important.]

[I would never want to be a humanâ€¦] He muttered sleepily.

[Why would you say that?]

[You humans have it so hard. In what world would anyone want to live to have to work so hard for an uncertain future? We just roam free, and do what we want with whoever we want. You guys have it way too rough.]

[HMMMMM.]

[Oh well. I know it's more complicated than thatâ€¦] He yawned, [I just don't like seeing you sad. I won't question you though; you've always been the smart one. I'm just here for teh ladiesâ€¦] I laughed out loud, and the lecturer glared at me.

"Did I say something amusing?" She glared.

"Um, no, I just, uh-"

[Busted!] Static thought-laughed, suddenly more alert.

"Are you communicating with a Pokemon in my class? I EXPECT 100% of your attention, not split with some rodent."

[Hey, who's she calling a-]

[SHHHH!] I silenced my Pikachu. I looked back at my teacher. "No, I just remembered something funny that pertained to something you mentioned. Sorry."

"And what was so funny?" She stared back, unphazed.

"Umâ€¦" Shit, I was in calculus. "T-The little exclamation point behind the ten. Reminds me of someone yelling TEN really loudly. Sorry, it's a bit juvenile, I know."

"Hmmm." She turned around and continued teaching.

\* \* \*

><p>[I don't know who the HELL she thinks is a rodentâ€¦!] Static

vented as I threw another wooden stick in his direction. He electrocuted it into soot like all the others as I reached for another stick. [I mean, who supplies the world with clean electricity? Voltorbs? They would blow us to bits!]<p>

[She's just old. She doesn't understand.]

[Whatever.] He blasted another branch. [I just wish I could fight HER in a battle, I would rip-] Just then, a female trainer appeared out of some nearby bushes. I was about to greet her, but static beat me to it.

[Oh heck yes.] He adjusted his pokespeak accordingly. [Hey! I saw you! Let's battle!]

[Sorry,] I apologized to the trainer, [my Pikachu is a bit worked up. Because we GREET people first, then ASK them politely if they want to battle. Right Static?] He grumbled telepathically.

"Sure, I would love to battle." She spoke. The sound of her voice startled me; I hadn't realized we were talking telepathically. She wore a scarlet red dress with a large black belt around her waist. She had a darker complexion, with deep, blue eyes. She reached around her belt and grabbed a pink poke ball covered in stickers.

"Go, Clefairy!" She shouted enthusiastically, tossing the pokeball. A red flash of light illuminated the woods, and a male Clefairy stood in a fighting stance. Static turned off "public-chat" on his Pokespeak.

[Standard beginning normal set, right?] Static beamed, completely in his element.

[You got it. Go!]

\* \* \*

><p>(Static POV)<p>

This was my thing. There were many things in life I couldn't control. My trainer planned my life, where we ate, and where we live. Don't get me wrong, he's fantastic, and I love our lifestyle, but at times I yearn for more control.

This. This is where I dominate. This is my arena, and this is my show. I cracked my knuckles. Time to shine.

[FAKE OUT!] I shouted, smashing my paws in front of the Clefairy. He flinched backwards, giving me the opening I needed. [Brick Break!] My paw glowed orange with fighting energy, and I crashed it against my opponent. Clefairy skyrocketed into a nearby tree, splintering the wood. My cheeks charged with electricity, and I took aim.

"Clefairy! Use double-"

[Thunderbolt!] I interrupted, electrocuting the pink puff. It collapsed on the grass.

[Yes! Heh! Didn't even get a chance to attack!]

[Don't get cocky, she has more.] My trainer commanded. I shook my head, he was right. I had to keep focused.

"Go, Wigglytuff!" She tossed another hot-pink pokeball in the air, revealing a rather large Wigglytuff.

[Alright, standard beginning normal set again, right?]

[NO.] My trainer commanded, and startled me. [You cannot use fakeout again, it will fail, and it will give her Wigglytuff an opening on you. Go straight for the Brick break thunderbolt combo.]

Damn, I completely would have forgotten that. That's why he's the trainer!

[Brick breaaaaak!] I thought-shouted rushing at the Wigglytuff. She caught me in midair and attempted a double slap, but I twisted out of her grasp and smashed her with my glowing palm.

"Wigg-AUGH!" She exclaimed as she crashed against the ground.

[Thunderbolt!] The nearby bushes crackled with electricity as I eliminated her remaining HP.

"Wigâ€|" She collapsed upon the grass.

[Nice work, Static. Only one more to go.] I beamed at my trainer's praise.

"Go, DarknessWithin!" She laughed, throwing a pitch-black luxury ball. I flinched as a Krokodile appeared, glowing with dark energy. My eyes grew wide, and I started backing away. Third evolution ground and dark type!? I didn't stand a chance, there was no wayâ€|

[Calm down.] My trainer commanded, feeling my fear leak into his consciousness. [Focus. You know what to do.]

Shaking, I pressed my palms together in an attempt to clear my mind. I closed my eyes. I felt the stomping of the ground as that monster charged me from across the forest.

In, out. In, out. This wouldn't work if I didn't focus. Deep breathsâ€|

I heard the vegetation crunching under her massive footsteps.

In, out. In, out.

I trusted my trainer completely. He wouldn't allow me to meditate too long, he would warn me in time to react.

In, out. In, out. Focus.

[Now, Static!] I focused the energy I had gathered, and released it into an aura of light blue light around me, aiming at the Krokidile.

[HIDDEN POWER ICE!] My aura smashed against the foe, sending him flying, and crunching against the unforgiving ground. I didn't give

him any time to get up. [Brick Break!] I shouted, smashing my hardened palm into his stomach.

[Good work, Pikachu.] The collapsed Krokodile laid on its side, and I was once again rewarded with Josh's praise. I beamed in victory.

The girl trainer on the other side returned her fainted Pokemon to its pokeball. Now would come the small talk, the shaking hands, and the talking about strategies. I rolled my eyes just thinking about it.

"Thanks for a great battle! I don't believe I caught your name?"

"It's Sandy. Hey, that's one hell of a Pikachu you got there!"

[You know it.] I said.

[Modesty.] Josh directed. I slumped back. [â€|but deserved.] I grinned.

"Yeah, he really is." I heard Josh say. "This little guy's gotten me out of some tough situations." I adjusted my Poke-speak.

[WE have gotten out of tough situa- Hey! Put me down!] Josh grabbed me playfully, and I struggled to get loose. After a second he placed me on his shoulder. I pouted accordingly.

"We make a good team." I messed up his hair as revenge. "Hey!"

[We do.] I jumped out of his reach as he blindly grabbed at me with his hair covering his eyes. By the time he managed to brush out his hair, I was already on the ground. I stuck my tongue at him.

"Aaaaanyway" Josh said, trying to recover from my little prank. "Do you want me to walk you to the Pokemon center? Protect you from any tall grass along the way? It's kinda dangerous without any Pokemon that are awake."

"I'll be fine." She revealed another Pokemon under her hat. "Just for emergencies. But I'll tell you what. Can I meet you later at the mall, maybe we could all get a bite?" Augh, humans. There are far too many social protocolsâ€|

"Sure, I'd love to. Meet you at seven?" Josh said. I noticed some feeling seeping from Joshes conscious to mine.

"Alright, see you there." The girl dressed in red disappeared back into the forest from the same direction we came.

I noticed the feeling bubbling up in Josh's consciousness again. Once she was gone, I looked back up at him.

[What are you thinking, Josh?] I asked him, not recognizing his feelings.

[I'm thinkingâ€|we have a date. How'd you like the Wigglytuff, Pikachu?]

[Meh.]

[Oh, so the Krokodile was more your style?]

[AAAAUGHHHHH! Ok, Wigglytuff! Wigglytuff!]

He laughed, and I laughed. It had been a good day.

\* \* \*

><p>(Sandy's POV)<p>

Wigglytuff sipped her lemonade at 7:02. I tapped my foot.

[He's not going to show, you know] Wigglytuff sipped her canned lemonade.

[You don't know that.]

[Sure. I'm sure he's just late, right? How long are we going to stay? Two hours, like last time?]

[IT WAS DAILIGHT SAVINGS TIME!] I shouted in my mind. [It was a mistake anyone could have made!]

[He didn't make a mistake, he didn't SHOW.]

[Shut up!]

[You're shooting too high. Maybe you should talk to that chubby kid with the Todidille-]

A sharmory flew close overhead, and a trainer with spiked orange hair jumped off, and landed adjacent from me. He bowed sarcastically, showing off an amazing smile.

"Sorry I'm late, may I join you?" He returned the Skarmory to its pokeball, and a little yellow mouse bounded up to his side.

"Certainly." I gave an I-told-you-so smile to Wigglytuff, finishing off my lemonade.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh's POV)<p>

I bit back tears as I approached Sandy's table, concentrating on preventing too much of my pain from leaking into Static's consciousness.

[Dude, are you ok?! You landed really messed up on your left paw!] Static thought in concern.

[Foot. It's fine, it just kinda stung from the landing.]

[Dude, it was SIDEWAYS. I SAW that. And I can sense when you're lying.]

[They you can also sense when you need to SHUT UP and let her believe

I stuck that.]

[That was like ten feet high! PLUS you jumped off instead of sliding!]

[Sush!] I commanded, and he fell silent, albeit concerned. I sat down across from sandy, we began chatting; it took every ounce of discipline I had not to clutch my ankle in agony.

"That was a nice trick!" She exclaimed. "You must practice with that Skarmory a lot!"

"Skarr? Nah, It's just a parlor trick I pull out every once in a while."

"Skarr? Creative name." She chuckled. I forced myself to smile.

"It's more fitting then you might think."

[Dudeâ€¦! It's all purple and stuff!] Static interrupted my thoughts. [Plus your shoe is red and sticky.]

[Ignore it. I'll finish this date, and they we'll walk to the hospital on the second floor. AFTER I get her number.]

[Dude, you're in agony. You've got to tell her, dude.]

[Stop saying dude, you sound stupid.] I snapped at him. [Plus she thinks I stuck the landing. So be quiet!]

We talked for a few minutes after that, mostly about Pokemon and battling, but also about our different families and where we were from. She told me how she got the Pokemon she traveled with, including Wigglytuff, her favorite. Static interrupted my thoughts again.

[It's like SIDEWAYS, Du-, Josh, You NEED to do something about this. I think I can see part of a bone.]

[I'm FINE.]I stated angrily. Static sighed and adjusted his pokespeak. [Hey! Stop! Don't you dare-]

[Hey cute-red-dress-girl!] Static thought to her, getting her attention. [My trainer is hurt, and we need to take him to a hospital.]

"I'm fine, don't listen to him, Sandy." I shot a glare at my Pikachu, who persistently continued.

[Holy crap, look at his ankle!] Wigglytuff exclaimed, pointing under the table. Sandy peeked under aswell. I rolled my eyes.

"Holy shit Josh, what happened!?"

I rolled my eyes. "Um, I guess I didn't quite stick the landing as well as I would have liked."

She put her face in her hand and sighed, annoyed. "Boys and their bravado. Here, let me help you to the hospital wing." She offered her

hand to help me get up.

"I'm fine, I can walk there myseAAUUGH!" I exclaimed, when I attempted to put any weight on my foot.

"Wait here, I'll call up a stretcher." She rolled her eyes and pulled a purple cellphone out of her pocket.

[Now I look like an assâ€¦] I muttered to Static.

[Better an ass than a guy with a phone number and an amputated paw.] He retorted.

[Worse than an ass that doesn't need an amputated FOOT and has no phone number.] I pointed out.

The doctor had bandaged my foot pretty well, and the medication definitely dulled the pain. Although I did bruise my foot rather badly and tore several ligaments, after resting for the night the doctor assured me I would be able to walk out the next day, albeit in a small cast. Once I was back to my normal 'not in hellish-pain' self, I apologized to Static for yelling at him, and thanked him for helping me when I really need it.

[No problem, DUDE.] He licked my hand that was dangling off the bed. To my surprise and delight, Sandy has stayed with me the whole time, calling me a knucklehead, but telling me what I did was a cute gesture none-the-less. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Wigglytuff and Static talking, but I didn't give it a second thought.

"You really could have hurt yourself, you know." Sandy condescendingly stared down at me, lying on the bed. "That jump was way too high for your first attempt."

"In my defense it was supposed to be lowerâ€¦" I smiled sheepishly.

[Aaaaaand...] Static interjected, [He was supposed to SLIDE off, not jump off like an idiot.]

"Hey, watch it, buddy, or I'll kick you with my good foot." I made a pathetic attempt to threaten him by wiggling my right foot. We all laughed.

"Hey, it's getting late." Sandy mentioned, looking at the time. "I'm gonna go home and grab something to eat for me and Wigglytuff, she's been complaining telepathically this whole time."

[Hey!] Wigglytuff stated angrily, [That was private!]

"Anyway," Sandy continued, "I'll catch you later. Call me." She planted a note on my stomach, and a kiss on my cheek. "Thanks forâ€¦at least, an interesting first date." She smiled and left the room.

[AWWWWWWWWWWWWW YEAH!] Static fist pumped the air, in a mixture of his and my emotions. [Dude, you TOTALLY have her. She's SO into you. I think she's like the nurse type, that likes, like, caring for sick people and stuff. Anyway, you NAILED it!]



[Thanks, but I think you have your own motivation for wanting me to have a second date with sandy.] I accused the coy Pikachu.

[W-what?] He quickly attempted to shield his emotions from me. [What are you talking about?]

[I saw you checking out her Wigglytuff, you were definitely interest-]

[No, nuh-ah. I didn't. I mean, I might have looked at her, or something, but not like that. Like, not like, like, THAT, you know? I was just looking, um, just, like being polite.] I laughed at how flustered he was becoming. [Don't laugh at me!] He glared, cheeks somehow more red the usual. [I was, we were just, like chatting. And you like, stare, I mean look at people when you talk. It's just what youâ€¦] SHUT UP!] Static turned away and stomped angrily on the ground. I smiled and reached across the bed and picked him up by the tail. [Hey, what the-!? Put me down! Hey, I'll shock you, I'll DO IT!] I placed him gently on my stomach, and petted him with my other hand.

[Calm down, maybe we can double date, huh?]

[Whatever, I don't care.] He turned his head away, but couldn't help purring as I continued petting him.

[Aww, don't talk like that, you sound like Skarr.] Static snorted with sudden laughter, and I knew I had one him over.

[Ok, fine. ONE double date.] Static grudgingly agreed.

\* \* \*

><p>(Sandy POV)<p>

As I walked out of Josh's room, I couldn't help but notice Wiggly's far off stare. Most friends would probably ask what she was thinking. Most friends would probably ask her what was up, or try to engage her in conversation. Most friends aren't named Sandy.

"Waaah!" She cried suddenly, colliding with my foot as she walked, tripping onto the smooth tile floor. [What was that for!?]

[Not congratulating me.] I smirked triumphantly.

[You didn't have to TRIP me!]

[You looked too peaceful.]

[So your conclusion is physical violence? Thanks, I feel \_LOVED\_.]

[Oh come now. You know you're loved.]

Wigglytuff got quiet again. This wasn't like her; she was normally very boisterous and obstinate.

[What's wrong?] I prodded.

[Nothing.]

[Come on.]

[Nothing!]

[Nuuuthin'.] I mimicked as we walked out of the hospital. She rolled her eyes. [Come on, what's up?]

[I don't want to talk about it here.]

I dropped my joking demeanor. [Do you want to go back home?]

[â€|Mhmm.] Her thoughts made it clear she was close to tears.

[Okay, let's go home then. Do you want me to carry you?]

[â€|yes.]

[Okay.] I braced myself, and picked her up in my arms as I headed back to my small home in the woods. The sun was still a few hours from setting, and cast a kind bluish pink gaze across the clouds as I made my way home.

Once we were out of the city, I placed her back on the ground. We were a few minutes from my cottage, a place I inherited from my father when I turned eighteen. It was small but cozy, and it was the corner of the Earth I could call my home.

Wigglytuff hadn't said anything on the way home. Her eyes looked glassy, and whenever I looked at her, she turned away.

[What's up?] I asked, once we had entered my home. [Seriously. What's wrong? ]

[â€|]

[Wigglytuff, come on. You can share anything with-] All the sudden, I felt all her thoughts ambush me at once.

[How can you be so fluid with relationships like that? Just being yourself and joking with people you hardly know? How is it so natural for you to just joke and talk, and not care what others think? How is it so easy for you to strike up a conversation without worrying what others think, without being self-conscious about their reactions, and without a care in the world?] She stopped suddenly, and looked sullen. [How can youâ€|not care? Not care about the world?]

[People's opinions don't bother me much. Chances are I won't see most of them again. But yours do. What do YOU think?]

She stared back at me, eyes blurred with unshed tears. [I wish I were as secure as you. That'sâ€|] her thoughts became momentarily blurred with sadness. [Iâ€|I hate myself.]

[What?]

[Everything about me is wrong! I'm a fat, I can't talk to people-] She pointed an accusing limb at the half-full bottle of water on the counter, [-and I'm mean. I'm mean to everyone, I'm mean to you. And I love you. You're the only one that has ever been nice to me, and I'm mean to you.] She sobbed, tears shattering on the smooth oak floor.

[Come here!]

I enveloped her head in my arms, cushioning her tears. [I love you too.] Her sobbing continued. [You're my favorite, you know?] She looked up at me, eyes still watering. [Clefairy is my friends, and so is Krokidille, and she doesn't even like me.]

[How can you like me?]

She started tearing up once again.

[Because you're funny.] I poked her in her belly, causing her to giggle reluctantly. [Because you're interesting.] I poked her again, and she laughed openly. [And!] I circled above her stomach with my finger, causing her to cringe in delight, hiding most of her stomach with her little limbs. [Because you're not mean. You're just insecure, about yourself.] I poked her again, and she shrieked with laughter. [You just needed to be sure of yourself. And you needed to love yourself, for not how other people look at you, but for how you look to YOURSELF.]

Her watery eyes glanced up at me, smiling through her tears. I wrapped my arms around her tightly, and she returned my embrace.

She sniffed once, regaining her composure. [S-so, you can't tell people I cried. Ever.] I smiled.

[Of course.]

[Ok. Um! T-thanks, Sandy.]

[Sure.]

She ran, and hugged my leg. I smiled and returned the embrace.

We sat around chatting for the better part of the night, slept, and woke up refreshed and reinvigorated. Wiggly woke me up, and with nothing to do on this lazy Sunday, I chose to enjoy it by just chatting with my best friend, and thinking of stupid things to do together. Inside my room there was a small pouch of marbles that I once played with as a child. I let my childish side get the better of me, and laughed as I snatched them from my bedside table.

[We're all idiots.] Wiggly laughed as I bounced another marble off her inflated body, trying to ricochet it into the garbage can. I missed again, for the thousandth time.

[You have to inflate more when the marble hits you.] I commanded, readying another marble.

[I CAN'T inflate more, this is my max. Plus it doesn't help this is stupid, and making me laugh!] The air rushed out of Wigglytuff as she cracked up laughing once more. I couldn't help but join in, and after a moment, we were both sprawled on the floor, covered with dust.

The doorbell interrupted our fit of giggles. I glanced at the clock,

which read a bit past 10. Who would be here at this time? Usually the only person to show up at my house was the mailman, and he never rang the doorbell. I got up and dusted myself off before going to check on my mysterious guest.

[Who is it?] Wigglytuff asked impatiently.  
>[I'm walking to find out!] I stuck my tongue out as I walked to the door, pulling it open haphazardly.<p>

I blinked at the recognizable spiky haired fellow at my door, grinning sheepishly. A small yellow mouse clung by his side.

[Josh? Hey, what are you doing here?]

\* \* \*

><p>(Wigglytuff POV)<p>

"Yeah, I got the brace on." Josh answered, looking sheepish. "I would have called, but, umâ€¦"

"But what?"

"Well, you didn't answer." Sandy flipped her phone out of her pocket, and to her dismay she realized it was on silent, with two unanswered calls and three texts. She rolled her eyes.

"Anyway, I was wondering if you wanted another battle. Static's been itching for a rematch against the one in your hat. He can't stand secrets." Josh laughed, looking down at his Pikachu.

[Augh!] I said, as she dragged me outside. [Boys! All they want to do is battle. Can't I go inside and watch T.V. while you guys fight?]

[No. You want to be more social, this is your opportunity.]

I rolled my giant, blue eyes. She was right of course, I just loathed to admit it.

[You don't have to.] She reminded me.

[No, no, you'reâ€¦] I sighed. [I'll do it.]

"TUFF." I puffed myself up to looking intimidating. I adjusted my pokespeak so I could communicate with the Pikachu.

[It won't be so easy this time, electric rodent. I know all your moves, you know almost none of mine.]

[Bring it on, bubble-gum.] Static replied, cheeks charged with electric power. I was taken back at his confidence.

I watched Static's face quickly display intrigue, confusion, and understanding. His trainer was giving him telepathic commands. I wondered what his first move would beâ€¦

[Wiggly, are you ready?] I gulped.

[Yeah, I think so.] I thought, gulping. [Double-slap, Body

Slam?]

[You got it. He's clearly going to charge at you, so be prepared.]

I braced myself and readied my palm. Sure enough, the Pikachu tore across the wildlife, and rushed at me, cheeks blazing with sparks.

"Piâ€|..!" He shouted, palm's glowing orange. [Shit.] I thought, [he's going straight for the Brick Break.]

"KAAAAAH!" He swiped at me. I dodged by a hair, and attempted to counterattack. "KAAA" he swiped again vertically. I slapped him once, disorienting him, and then twice. He jumped backwards to avoid further damage. "KAAAAAH!" He dashed at me, paw transformed into a fist. He smashed it against my skull, sending me flying. I crashed into something hard, and massive pain coursed through my body. Suddenly, the world's color shut off, and was replaced with pure black, devoid of color, sound, and life.

## 2. I don't really hate humans

â€|

"-e fine. Tell your Pikachu to be more careful though, would you? Usually Pokemon never suffer injuries due to fighting, but it looks like this oneâ€|"

â€|

"â€|a sec, this process isn't exactly instantaneous, especially for something of this extentâ€|"

â€|

Color slowly filled my vision, colors blurring together in indistinct, unclear lines. I felt tired beyond belief, and my head felt insanely fuzzy.

"Oh good, I think she's coming to!" I heard someone say. Sandy?

I tried to say something, but nothing happened. I felt around my ear for the Pokespeak, but it was no longer there. I couldn't talk, or see. I was helpless. I slumped back onto whatever surface I was on, tired and defeated.

My motion must have triggered some kind of recognition, because I felt someone hook a Pokespeak to my ear just after I laid back down.

[Just try to relax.] I heard someone say. [You'll be alright, they're taking care of you now.]

[I am SO SORRY, SERIOUSLY. I didn't even mean to, I was just attacking like I normally do, and I didn't mean to-] Another voice apologized, clearly distraught and nerve wracked.

[It's fine.] Another voice interrupted. [We know you didn't mean to. And she'll be fine too, she just needs some time.]

I took a deep breath. [Whatâ€¦happened?] I managed to think coherently.

[I hit you into a rock, but it was a HUGE accident!] I heard a voice yelp. [I didn't mean to, I was just struggling to hit you, then I saw the opening and I went for it. I didn't even look behind you, I just hit you as fast as I could. I'm really sorry!]

[The important thing is-] I heard a voice that I could now identify as Sandy's, [-you'll be alright. Sleep now for a bit longer, and I'll be back with some food and a treat, okay? Just relax for now.]

[Do you mind if I stay?] The voice that must have been Static's begged. [Iâ€¦]

[I understand. Sure. We'll be back in a bit. Don't beat yourself up though, Static.]

I heard a door close, and the voices stopped. I opened my eyes again, and the swirling colors lessened, revealing a large white oval, surrounded in pink. It took a few moments for me to realize I was staring at my stomach.

I looked up. My head was resting on something softâ€¦pillows? There were white sheets beneath me, and curtains to my left and right. Josh's Pikachu stood on my bed, face covered with guilt and worry.

[A-are you okay?] He asked, clearly terrified of my answer. I combed my fur with my paw, trying to make myself look moderately presentable in my current state.

[My head is killing me, butâ€¦yeah, I think I'll be fine. That's what they said anyway.]

[I didn't mean to hurt you, really! I was just trying-]

[I know, I believe you.]

Static gulped guiltily as I tried to smooth my disheveled coat. No matter what I tried, my unruly pink fur stood straight up, mocking my attempts at taming the wild fuzz. I growled, pressing harder against myself.

Suddenly I felt a hand press down against my own. I looked up at Static, who motioned for me to relax. I sank back on the pillow, feeling a bit like a child, as he watched me with a concerned gaze. He licked his paw and ran it through my coat, smoothing out the more unkempt patches.

Some patches proved too unruly, and instead of his paw, I felt him slowly lap at the areas of disheveled fur. It felt a bit odd to feel someone else do that to myself, but the feeling wasn't bad. After a few moments, he stood back to admire his work.

[Thanks.] I thought quietly.

[No problem.]

[Hey guys, did we miss anything?] Josh's boisterous thoughts echoed through our minds before he walked into the room. Static's eyes went wide, and he stumbled away from me in a quick attempt to look inconspicuous.

[Uh, she woke up.] He mumbled. Josh came in carrying two large bags of what I could smell was Take-out from the Sinnoh dinner. Sandy walked by my side, and placed a fresh plate of delicious smelling noodles right beside me.

[There you are. Don't eat too fast, lying down and all, okay?] But I was already eating, grabbing handfuls of the noodles and gobbling them up as fast as I could. Sinnoh food was a delicacy in Kanto, and I was sure not to pass up an opportunity like.

[Thanks!] I garbled as I continued eating.

[No problem, I thought you'd like your favorite food, maybe it would cheer you up a bit.] Sandy smiled, bringing her hand down to brush my fur before recoiling it suddenly. [Ewww, why's your fur all wet?]

Static's eyes went wide, and I hesitated for a moment. [U-uh, it's just really hot in here I guess.]

[Oh, sorry. Let me open some windows.] Sandy apologized. Static shot me a guilty but amused expression.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

Two weeks had gone by so fast. Wiggly had been taken out of the hospital after resting for a day, and every day after that, Static and I had spent at Sandy's door, handing out and playing games. It was quiet life, and we were all pretty happy. Unfortunately, life's call beckoned far too quickly. School had let out for me, and Sandy's part time summer job required her to fulfill many more hours than she was currently. Static was also feeling under the weather at our temporary goodbyes. He didn't cry of course (far too 'manly' for that) but he did have a quiver in his thoughts as we waved goodbye to the residence of the small cottage in the woods. After giving our goodbyes, and promising I would return back to Celadon City frequently, I turned to mount my less-than-eager Skarmorry.

[Are you quite finished, or shall I turn to dust waiting for you? I suppose the world would not miss me; perhaps it would even be better off.] My emotional Skarmorry commented, looking into the distance. I sighed.

[Don't talk like that, Skarmorry, you know you're loved.] I petted his silver, metallic down. He turned away.

"Alright. Visit soon! I'll keep in contact with you, I promise!" Sandy waved as I flew off, off to the new, virgin lands I had never before explored "the Sevii Islands. I had received news by an announcement there that there was a Pokemon adoption/babysitting service that was in need of assistance. It had been rather vague, but it intrigued me nonetheless, along with the prospect of visiting the Isles.

"Goodbye!" I shouted to Sandy, approaching the clouds. I felt the wind tussle my orange hair, and the mist rush across my face, and thought of Sandy once moreâ€¦ I missed her already.

After flying for quite some time, and making dull conversation with my depressed Skarmory, we landed on the Sevvi islands. Once Skarr landed, I slid down his silver back (carefully, to avoid further aggravation to my foot) and stood next to him, petting his metallic feathers.

[Your beast of burden. Is that all I am? Is that all I'm meant for in this world, to carry you from place to place? I'm not mad I suppose, at least there's one thing in life I'm good at.] Skarmory looked towards the sea.

[Skarr, you know you're more important than that.]

[Josh, I can sense when you're lying.]

[Then you know I'm not.] I said firmly. He remained silent. [Skarmory, I've been ignoring this for too long. You've always been dark and poetic, but never depressed. What's wrong, seriously?]

[Life has no meaning. I see everything for what it is, with no distractions of valor or color. Everything is simply different shaded of gray, of soul crushing depression.]

[What happened, Skarr?]

[Different shades of gray, melting down into the eventual pit of oblivion. Nothing matters in this world; all of our actions are eventually meaningless. Our anger, hate, heroism, loveâ€¦]

[Love?] I asked. Skarr turned to me with tears in his normally fierce, bird eyes.

[Love. She never loved me.] He collapsed into a pile of feathers, sobbing. [It doesn't matter. Nothing does.]

[Whoâ€¦?] Oh shoot, he's talking about the ditto. About a month ago, I put Skarmory in the daycare so he could have more interaction from different Pokemonâ€¦ I suppose he got a bit more 'interaction' than I had thought. [We can talk. Pokemon don't mate for life, there will be tons of other Pokemon that find you-]

[Not like herâ€¦] He turned off his poke-speak. I sat beside him anyway and petted his metallic coating, and together we watched the sun set, on another beautiful dayâ€¦

As the moon rose on the blackened shores of the Sevvi islands, I returned Skarr to his Luxury ball. I was honestly concerned. He had always been dark, but never to this extent. He needed something happy in his life again. It wasn't an immediate concern, I knew I could keep Skarr in stasis inside his Pokeball for eternity and he wouldn't age a day, but before I flew with him again I wanted a plan.

I tossed another Luxury ball into the air, and after a bright flash of red, my furry yellow companion stood at my side. He yawned.



[Oh, good, night. I'm exhausted.] He fell forward onto the ground and feigned sleep.

[Hey, at least help me set up the blanket and sleeping bags!]

[ZZZZzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz] he thought loudly. I sighed, but laughed to myself setting up the necessary supplies. I grabbed him by the foot and shoved him head-first into his sleeping bag.

"PiKAAAA!" he shouted in duress, then switched to telepathy. [Hey, I could suffocate in here!]

[I could only hope.] I laughed, and he poked his head out.

[Not funny.] He pouted, turning away from me.

[You know I love you.] I pushed him playfully, and he rolled away.

[Hey, ow! Yeah, yeah, whatever, sappytrainersayswhat?] Static replied. I laughed, then snuggled into my own sleeping bag, and drifted asleepâ€|

\* \* \*

><p>A wondrous pink-teal sky greeted me as I arose. The new sunlight illuminated the previously shaded island, erasing the memory of the previous darkness. Static snored peacefully beside me, his consciousness empty of any large thoughts.<p>

I didn't disturb him, and took the time to think about Skarr. I hadn't neglected him, I just thought the problems would resolve themselves. Was I foolish? I shook my head. Thoughts of blame wouldn't help Skarr, solutions would.

I felt a familiar tug at my thoughts, as a reluctant Pikachu squinted angrily at the morning sun. Static pulled the sleeping bag over his head and though-mumbled some choice obscenities.

[You awake yet?] I prodded at his dazed mind.

[â€|no.] He said stubbornly. He peeked out of the sleeping bag. [Do I have to get up yet?]

[Nah. You can sleep more if you want to.]

[â€|Meh, I'm up.] He crawled out of his sleeping back and rolled it up terribly, and then handed the crumpled mess to me. I rolled my eyes.

[Thanksâ€|] I stuffed the mess into my backpack.

[Where are we going today?] Pikachu asked with a curious, sleepy grin.

[Lets check out the Pokemon adoption place.] It would be a small walk there, and it would give me time to think about Skarr. Maybe something there would help me figure out what to doâ€|

\* \* \*

><p>Static pushed the door open, and we both entered a dank, shaded building. The door hit a bell that I assumed was meant to ring to alert employees of potential customers, but instead it simply clanked softly. It was broken.<p>

A heavy older woman sat at a desk adjacent to the entrance, smoking a cigarette. She looked unhappy to see us, her already wrinkled face twisted into a look of distrust.

"What do you want?" A puff of grey smoke blew towards us, making me momentarily consider leaving.

"Isâ€|this the Pokemon adoption center?" I asked, looking cautiously around at the musky, degraded building.

"Yeah, yer in the right place. You musta been one of dem trainers that got the letter, huh?" She stared at me with, bored, glazed over eyes. "We only got one left, and trust me, you don't want 'em."

"What's wrong with â€|" I thought hard for a quick moment. Calling a Pokemon 'it' was a grave insult, which made it difficult when you didn't know the gender. If I messed this up, Pikachu wouldn't let me hear the end of it. "â€|that Pokemon?" I concluded. Static nodded happily.

"It's all screwed up." She responded, making Static bristle. "It ain't a purebred, and it's stupid as hell. Damn thing can't even go outside without jumping at its own shadow." The lady blew another puff of grey smoke. Pikachu growled at the sound of hearing 'purebred', a term normally used for animals, not Pokemon. Also, he was not pureblooded, a fact that only intensified his hatred for the word. Her use of 'it' didn't help matters.

[Calm down. She's not worth it.] I told Static. He stood behind me, glaring at the employee. "Can we see the Pokemon anyway?" I asked.

"Whatever." She blew another coulomb of smoke, and left through an employee door.

[AUGH! I HATE humans.] Static raged. [Making us into ANIMALS. Calling us RODENTS and PUREBLOODED or MUTTS. There is NOTHING wrong with me! I can fight just as well as any other pureblooded Pikachu, I'll show you!] He pointed menacingly at the door. Static remained quiet for a moment. [Y-you think I'm just as good as like, a pureblood, right Jo-]

[Of COURSE.] I interrupted. [Don't even think otherwise.] He smiled.

[I don't really hate humansâ€|] He apologized. I rolled my eyes and made sure he felt appreciated.

The elderly woman pushed open the door, revealing a frightened Charmander. It hugged her leg, eyeing us like a cornered sheep would eye a wolf, full of morbid fear. The woman shook her leg violently,

kicking the Charmander off her.

"Git!" She exclaimed. The Charmander landed on his stomach, cringing and putting his hands over his head. I couldn't help glaring at the employee for how she treated the Charmander.

"Do you have a Pokespeak that the Charmander could use to talk with me?" I asked her, through gritted teeth. She stared back with her dull eyes.

"That devil technology isn't to be used HERE. We don't need to talk to animals." She pushed Charmander closer to me with her foot. "You want him or what?"

I frowned. Normally it was customary to talk with the Pokemon first, to discover what his or her interests were, and to see if the two of you were compatible. In this circumstance, I figured anywhere was better than here for the little guy. "Yes, I'll take good care of him. Is this your last Pokemon?"

"Yerrpers. Now I can retire from this dump, and we can finally burn it to the ground. Should have happened long ago." She tossed her still burning cigarette onto the carpet.

I glared once at the obese woman as she slowly killed herself with the cigarettes. I picked up the Charmander and held him carefully in my arms.

"Bye." I pushed the door open, Static at my heels. Once we were a short distance away we both sighed in unison. What a terrible experience.

[At least someone's life got better.] I thought to static, referring to the shivering Charmander in my arms. [I'm not sure he's well. Let's go to the Pokemon Center down the road, give him a checkup and buy another Pokespeak for him.]

[Sounds good.] Static bounded at my feet. [Any place is better than that placeâ€¦]

\* \* \*

><p>"You don't need to explain it to ME, I know that woman is a demon." An understanding nurse spoke, while checking the Charmander. "I've been trying to get her license for Pokemon adoption taken away for years, but to no avail. You're a saint for taking this guy out."<p>

"Thanks. Is there anything wrong withâ€¦" I hesitated again, trying not to say 'it'.

"Healthy male." She said, sensing my distress. I smiled.

"Thanks. Before we go, do you have any Pokespeaks for sale? I don't have a spare, and the woman there didn't-" As I spoke, the nurse tossed the small device into my unprepared hands.

"On me. You're doing a nice thing here, it's the least I can do." She smiled.

"Awesome, thanks!"

"Don't mention it. Take good care of that Charmander, and don't be shy about coming back here if there's any trouble!"

"Ok, thanks so much!" I fumbled with the machine on the way out, making sure it was set correctly. After walking a short distance, Static and I stopped by a nearby tree. Charmander stood several feet away from us, his blue eyes wide with caution. He eyed the Pokespeak suspiciously.

"It's alright" I said, trying to soothe him with my voice. I approached him slowly, and he cringed with anticipation. I patted his head as he shook in anxiety, and slid the Pokespeak onto his scalp.

[-going to hurt me! I don't know this place, are you going to hurt me? You are, I'm sure of it." His large, reptilian eyes closed, and large tears appeared at the corners.

[I'm not going to hurt you, I promise.] I lifted him lightly, and placed him with static near the tree. I sat next to them both.

[Everyone's hurt me. I've never been outside the house for longâ€¦everything outside looks scary.] He hugged his tail, and cried softly.

[Hey, it's not so bad out here. There's a lot of fun stuff to do, and things to see!] I tried to brighten the Charmander's mood, but he looked as terrified as ever.

[Look, wuss.] Static chimed in. [We're POKEMON. Our parents lived outside, you were probably conceived outside, and chances are we'll be living a lot of our lives OUTSIDE. Get used to it.]

[Static!] I berated my insensitive Pikachu. [Be nice.]

[I am!] He thought-shouted, causing the Charmander to cry harder. [Look at this, he's a huge cry-baby! I'll toughen him up, lets teach him to battle!] Static's cheeks charged with electricity.

[STATIC. NO. If you can't behave I'm going to put you in the Pokeball until all this is resolved.]

Static shocked the ground near Charmander, causing him to yelp in shock. [Come on, just a LITTLE fun Josh!]

[Return.] I clicked the Pokeball on the belt, absorbing him in a beam of scarlet light. Charmander stood petrified; his teary eyes staring up into my own. [Come, sit by me. I won't hurt you.]

Charmander remained motionless for a moment, then slowly inched his way toward me. I waited patiently.

Eventually he sat down next to me, trembling slightly. I made no movement to scare him.

[I'm sorry; we keep calling you 'Charmander'. I realize some Pokemon like being called their species names, but others like to choose

other names. What is your name?] I asked him, calmly.

[My name?] He looked confused. [Matilda never talked to me much. I guess 'It'?] I cringed involuntarily.

[I-Is there a name that you would want to be called? I think it is a littleâ€¦ umâ€¦] I thought of a better way to phrase my concern over the treatment of the Charmander.

[Short?] He asked.

[â€¦Yeah, ok. Do you have anything else in mind?]

[Can you give me some options?] He asked happily. He still looked fearful, but he looked more curious and upbeat now.

[Well, you're a fire type, and typically Pokemon names are indicative of their type. For example, many people name their Pikachu's after electrical terms, so the names are usually 'sparky', or 'shocker' and such.]

[Or Static!] He grinned, understanding the topic.

[Exactly. Since you're a fire type, normally it would be something like 'Flare' or 'Match' or something. Those are bad example.] I shook my head.

[What about Nova? I heard that Nova's are giant stars in the sky that are big and strong. Maybe one day I could live up to my name.]

"Novaâ€¦" I said the name out loud, testing it on my tongue. [That's a good choice. It's fairly unique, I think people will be impressed with it when you tell them.]

[People?] He shrunk back. [What kind of people?]

[Nice people.] I thought calmly. [I'm a trainer, my Pokemon and I travel the world to see new areas and to find new adventures. We also battle other Pokemon for fun.]

[NO! Nonononono, I HATE battling!] He covered his face with his paws. [Please don't make me battle. It's scary, and it makes me feel sick.]

[You don't have to battle if you don't want to. You don't even have to stay with me, if you don't want to. If you wanted, I could bring you back to the city, and drop you off at a nice adoption house, and you could get adopted by a breeder, or a researcher.]

[No. Youâ€¦seem different. You're nice. I like you.] Nova stuck out his little Charmander limbs and hugged me. I smiled.

[Do you mind watching battles?] I asked, after a moment. [Static's full of, um, 'confidence', and he's going to want to show you his skills.]

[Better she use them on someone else then me.] He shrugged. [Yeah, watching is okay.]

[Wait, did you say 'she'?]

[Yeah? Static is a she, isn't she?]

[Noooooooooooooâ€¦] I laughed. [Static is male.]

[Oh, really? I couldn't tell.] Nova mumbled. I giggled harder. [I didn't know! He looks kinda effeminate, okay!?] My arms wrapped around my sides as I convulsed with laughter. [Don't tell him I said that! I was just, umâ€¦!] I tried to breathe, but my laughter prevented the airflow to my lungs. [Promise you won't tell, okay? PROMISE!] I nodded, still in a fit of giggles.

\* \* \*

><p>"There's almost no wild Pokemon here. Even the tall grass I sparse." I spoke aloud, with Static and Nova trailing at my heels.<p>

[We're looking for wild Pokemon for Static to fight, right?] Nova asked.

[Yeah.] I answered. [Static gets, umâ€¦] I thought of a way of putting it gentlyâ€¦

[I get aggressive.] He nodded toward me appreciatively. [It's a trait usually Raichu only get, but for some reason I get it too. It's because of the electrical charge, I just need to realize it every once in a while, to SHOCK something, you know?] Static looked frustrated with himself. Nova and I looked reassuringly at the little mouse, making him smile once more.

[I know a Pokemon that Pikachu could battle!] Nova piped up. [She's really nice, we talked sometimes.]

[What type of Pokemon is it?] Static replied excitedly, suddenly much more interested in the conversation.

[She's a Skarmorry, but she doesn't look right. People make fun of her for looking the way she does, so she moved to that rock way over there.] Nova pointed at a small island too small to be inhabited by humans. [She saw me the time I ran away, and made me feel better. She even offered to battle me.] Nova smiled, eyes misty with the memory.

[Well, what are we waiting for?] Static shouted impatiently. [Send out Skarr and have him fly us to the island!]

The gears in my head turned as I slowly made my plan. [Wellâ€¦] I thought to Static and Nova, [That island is a bit small for a battle. Perhaps Skarr could convince her to battle over here?]

Static adjusted his Pokespeak so he was just communicating with me. [I know that feeling. What are you planning, Josh?]

[You'll see] I smiled.

\* \* \*

><p>(Skarr POV)<p>

I felt myself being torn from my blissful stasis once again. My lackluster metallic wings stretched themselves involuntarily as I gazed into the aged sunlight.

I wondered if apathy was the only escape from the pain in this word.

[Hey Skarr!] My trainer shouted over-enthusiastically. His eager tone sounded like dissonance to my cold, darkened heart.

[What do you command of me?] My monotone thoughts conveyed neither anger nor eagerness, it simply existed. Like myself.

[I don't COMMAND anything of you.] My trainer responded, smiling hesitantly. [I was just wondering if you couldâ€¦]

His words were lost to my mind as my eyes caught sight of the most stunning Skarmory I had ever laid eyes upon. Calling her radiant would be an insult. Her beauty was too vast for me to describe. Her bronze, glorious wings reflected the golden speckles of light, creating an aura of wondrous energy around herself. She extended her wings, showing off the most amazing shade of forest green my eyes had ever beheld. Her keen eyes redirected themselves at my own, and for once in my life, I was tongue-tied.

[Soâ€¦ what do you think about it, Skarr? Can you do it for me?] My trainer's thoughts broke through my own. The Skarmory flexed her wings and flew at me with amazing speed, touching down gracefully just feet from myself. Her scrutinizing gaze never left my eyes.

"Why do you stare at me?" She questioned, speaking in our harmonious, native tongue. "Do you wish to scoff at me, like the others? Do you wish to sell me to a circus, or put me in some kind of freak show, like all the others attempted to do!?" She created a quick gust of wind, sending my spiraling into the air.

"You misunderstand!" I spoke quickly, projecting my voice so she could hear it below. "We are travelers who have stumbled upon this place by accident. We do not wish to capture or harm you in any way, and I would never scoff at your splendor."

"Do not mock me with your words, I know of my odd coloration. It is not a note of pride, but rather a discord; a deformity worthy of death in my kin."

"Then they are fools, for a deformity is not a fitting word for your beauty. My dull metallic wings weep in comparison." The dark green interior of her wings complemented the golden bronze coloration in a way I had not believed to be possible. "Truly you are a rare and spectacular creation."

She turned from me, preening herself in embarrassment. "You are too kind, traveler."

"Rather, I am too shallow, too ignorant to describe one as radiant as you. Please, call me Skarr." I landed next to her, and touched her forehead to my own. She brushed her reflective, golden bronze wing on my own, and together they glistened like silver and gold.

I heard the far away struggles of Josh and Static.

[Hey, lemme go! I was promised a battle, I intend to get it!]

[Later!] Josh commanded to the impatient Pikachu. Charmander trailed not far behind. I shot a quick message of gratitude towards Josh for my solitude, then turned my full attention to the wondrous creature in front of me.

"You have me at a disadvantage; I don't believe I caught your name." I crooned, caressing her ductile bronze neck. She smiled.

### 3. A time for celebration

(Josh POV)

[Was she a shiny? Why are we leaving? JOOOSH, ANSSWEEERRR MEEEEEE!] My annoying Pikachu pestered. [If she was a shiny, that's like, really rare, right? We should capture her! I could help, you know. I bet-]

I ignored him and continued walking. His thoughts buzzed like a tiny insect in my mind. The buzzing steadily increased as I walked, until it became a small roar inside my mind. Grudgingly, I opened my mind back to Static.

[JOOOOSH! That's important! We could be like famous-]

[Not right now, Static.] I urged.

[Why not? Skarr has her distracted, I could totally go for the kill!]

[Maybe later, right now Skarr has some stuff he needs to settle.]

[So? He can settle his stuff later, there's a SHINY right here!]

I felt a prod at my consciousness, but no words followed. I looked down at Nova. Did he mean to say something?

[What's up Nova?] I asked, curiously.

He took a deep breath. [U-um, do you mind if I say something?]

[Go right ahead.] I smiled. Static grumbled something about being ignored.

[Um, I would, uh...prefer if we didn't capture her.]

[Not you too! Why the heck not?!] Static roared. Nova shrunk back and clung to the cuff of my jeans, terrified.

[Static, calm down.] I ordered. Static mumbled angrily to himself. [Now, why not Nova?]

[W-well, why would you guys want to capture her?] He asked



quietly.

[To show her off, DUH! Do you know how rare a shiny is!? We could show her off everywhere, we'd be famous!] Static yelped.

[She doesn't like attention. She almost died from her deformation back at her normal family. Everyone would be staring at her, and talking about herâ€|s-she wouldn't like that.]

[How do you know what she likes?!] Static growled. I shot him a stern look, before looking back at Nova, awaiting an answer. Nova shifted awkwardly, foot to foot.

[I mean, I kinda know her, a little bit. It's a long story thoughâ€|]

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

[The adoption house wasn'tâ€|a fun place. I didn't know very much about what went on, but it was always really crowded with Pokemon. It wasn't always bad, because some of them were nice to me, but they were always the ones that were taken first.] I sighed, staring at the blades of grass beneath myself. [Matilda wasn'tâ€|nice to us all the time. She would fit us all in a single room, which made it really hot and uncomfortable. We could barely move sometimes. For some reason, many Pokemon started getting adopted all at once. A lot of trainers came by and started picking up Pokemon. A lot of my friends got adopted, and I felt really alone. No matter how many trainers came, no one wanted meâ€|]

[Awww, I want you Nova.] Josh smiled, picking me up and hugging me. I tried not to, but I felt warm tears begin to soak Josh's jacket as he held me against his shoulder. [I'm sorry you had to go through that. It sounds like an experience no one should have to suffer through.]

[I'm sorry for yelling.] Static muttered quietly. Josh put me back on the grass.

[It's okay.] I said quietly. [I-I'm alright.] I wiped at my eyes with my orange paw. [Um, W-what was I talking about?]

[The adoption house?] Josh supplied sadly. \_Oh, rightâ€|\_

I took a deep breath to steady myself. [There were still a few of us left, maybe about three. There was a reason we were all still here, we all had something wrong with us. There was a Squirtle that's dad was a Shedinja so it only had one hit point and couldn't really battle, there was a Bulbasaur with really bad allergies-]

[A Bulbasaur with allergies?] Static suddenly chortled with laughter. [Oh my gosh, it's a PLANT! It would be sneezing everywhere!]

[Yeahâ€|he was really self-conscious about itâ€|] I muttered. Static stopped laughing and looked a bit guilty.

[â€|and me of course. Timid Charmander.] I gulped.

[That's not something that's wrong with you.] Josh supplied.

[It is when your parents were both dragonsâ€¦] I looked to the side and sighed. [Well, technically only one, but still. So yeahâ€¦even those guys got adopted eventually. She was mean to everyone, but since I was the only one left, she took it all out on me. It wasâ€¦rough.]

[What did she do?] Josh asked, stone faced.

[Hit me sometimes. Not hard, butâ€¦I didn't know why. She yelled a lot, but I never knew what she was saying. I was so confused, I never knew what to doâ€¦]

[One day, it was really bad. She came in really upset. She yelled at me for a really long timeâ€¦I had no idea what she meant, but it sounded like she was mad at me. She kicked me really hard, and it hurtâ€¦]

She had left the door open though. I didn't think about it, I didn't know what I was doing, I just ran out. I had seen the outside, but only a few times. I didn't know what was out there, I didn't know what to expect, I just knew it had to be better than...] I scrunched up my face in an attempt not to cry again. Static walked up and hugged me. His fur brushed against mine as I shook; trying to keep my unshed tears from spilling down my face again.

\_I swear, all I do is cryâ€¦\_

[It's alright.] I heard the Pikachu say just to me. [You're okay now.]

I sniffed. After a moment, I steadied myself, and tried to compose myself with a quick breath. The Pikachu nodded, though still looked concerned.

[â€¦so I ran.] I sighed. [I ran, and ran. I had no idea where I was going, how far I would go that way, or what I would do when I got there. I just ran. I ran until I reached the ocean, and the rocks on the shore. I didn't know what to do. I was hungry, and tired, and alone, and I just sat there and cried. I don't know for how longâ€¦]

[Karliah talked to me. Her home was on a rock, overlooking the ocean. She saw me, and flew over to talk. I didn't know her, and I was scared, but she was nice to me. So few people had been nice to meâ€¦]

[She talked about herself too. Many people tried to capture her, to put her in a freak show or kill her for her deformity. In a way, our problems were almost exactly opposite.] I smiled, despite my story. [Her problem made her more desirable, and she just wanted to be alone. Mine made me less, but all I wanted was someone that wanted meâ€¦]

[Anyway!] I stood up, puffed my chest, and tried to compose myself once more. [T-that's why I would prefer you guys didn't catch her. Most of her life she's spent on the run, and now she's finally found a place on this island where she doesn't have to anymore. I mean, I

can't stop youâ€¦|]

[Don't worry about it, we won't. We understand now.] Josh nodded. I sighed with relief, still a bit shaken. Static nodded at Josh in agreement.

[T-thanks. Really, it means a lot-]

[Don't worry about it.] Josh smiled.

We talked for much longer that day. I don't remember the last time I had spoken so much; it was really out of character for me. It feltâ€¦good. For the first time in years, I felt like I could relax. Was I still scared? Maybe a little bit. Maybe there was something deep down that always made me afraid that wouldn't go away. But for now, I felt safe. I was finally adopted, finally with friends.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

It was finally night, and I had just finished making the campsite. Three sleeping bags (the particularly wrinkled one belonging to static) rested on a large, comfortable blanket. I had a tent, but it was almost never used due to the impeccable weather.

Nova fell asleep almost instantly. It had been a big day for the little guy, and I could tell he was content, even with Static's pestering. Next to me, my Pikachu rolled back and forth uncomfortably in his sleeping-bag. I gazed at the stars.

I wondered how Sandy was doing. I sent her a text this morning and she hadn't replied, though I supposed that wasn't atypical. I flipped my cellphone between my fingers.

Static noticed me fiddling with my phone, and he turned to me curiously.

[Hey, did Wigglytuff say anything?]He loathed looking vulnerable, so he added, [Not that I really care, I was just, you know, wondering.]

The sun was rapidly setting over the wondrous Sevvi islands, shooting beams of orange and pink through the abstract wanderings of the clouds. Another wonderful day.

[Hey Pikachu?] I thought to Static. He turned his attention away from the complaining Charmander momentarily. [I thought the Pokemon adoption center would be more of aâ€¦well, PROBLEM. As it turns out, Matilda was just a terrible person who wanted to get rid of her Pokemon.]

[What's your point, Josh?]

[That's the reason we came here, to explore the Sevvi Islands, but more so to help out. Now that that's solved-]

[You wanna go back!?] Static wagged his tail unintentionally. [Could we hang out at Sandy's house for a bit? Maybe have another battle?!]

[You just want to see Wiggly again. Chubby chaser.]

[I am NOT! We were just talking in there, I told you that!]

[You left your Pokespeak on, Stat. May I tell you it was hard to have a conversation while feeling what-]

[WE WERE JUST TALKING!] Static insisted, blushing slightly redder then his electric cheeks. He stormed away, pouting.

[Awww, come on bud. You know I'm just messing around.]

[Whatever.] Static grumbled, tossing himself to the side.

There was a long pause. Static's mind was too full of thoughts for me to believe he had fell asleep. I rested quietly on top of my sleeping bag, head resting on my arm, gazing at the wondrous night sky. Stars lit up the darkness, speckling the night with beautiful dots of color. I felt myself being drawn into unconsciousness, content with the fact that the stars would be the last thing I would see.

[Hey Josh?] Static 's thoughts interrupted my tranquility.

[Yeah?]

[â€|I do want to go back to Kanto. Andâ€| not just to battle.] I smiled at Static's response.

[Why else?] I asked.

[â€|I dunno. Wiâ€|] He had trouble forming the thoughts to say to me. I smiled at his struggle. He could do it. [I don't, augh. The time we hung out together after the battling was fun, I guess.] Static attempted to conclude.

[We? You and who?] I pestered. Static grumbled to himself, sinking further into his sleeping-bag.

[Wiggly. I do like her, you were right.] He muttered, quickly tossing over, not facing me. I leaned over and scratched his ear, and he purred reluctantly.

[I know, Stat. I was just messing with you earlier. We'll go see them soon.]

[When, soon?]

[After we convince Ol' Rusty over there to fly us.] Static flinched with a giggle at the mention of Skarr. [Once we get a few badges, I'm sure we can hop down to Sandy's, and you and Wiggly can hang out again.]

[â€|Thanks Josh.]

[No problem.] I sighed, content. I snuggled further into my sleeping bag, and thought of tomorrow. Static and I both forgot to turn off our Pokespeaks, and our dreams were meshed together with those we cared for and missed.

\* \* \*

><p>I arose early, with the taste of the morning dew on my lips. The golden aura of sunlight had yet to graze my face, and the still shadows of night casted their lulling powers upon my friends. They slept soundly in night's temporary embrace, and the dark's hypnotizing tranquility closed my drowsy eyes, and muddled my thoughtsâ€|<p>

[Joshâ€|] I heard though the mist of my dreams. [Josh...] The thought was far away, but I recognized it from somewhere, far away. My eyelids were so heavyâ€|

[Josh, please arise. I wish to talk to you.]

[â€|Skarr?] I sat up, and rubbed my tired eyes.

[I'm sorry to have awakened you, but I have something urgent I wish to discuss. Can you meet me north of your current orientation?]

[Mmmâ€|yeah.] I mumbled in a sleepy haze. I stood up and attempted to gain my orientation by the sun's positioning, before realizing how foolish I was.

[North is in front of you.] I blamed my poor directions on my sleepiness, and stumbled forward through the darkened forest. A soft wind blew overhead, and I saw metallic wings glistening with moonlight, soaring below the motionless clouds. Skarr landed softly, and bowed his head, allowing me to pet the reflective surface.

[You have been more than a friend in my troubled times, but I am forced to ask yet another favor of you.] Skarr thought with a hint of sadness. [It is in reference to Karlihah.]

[Karlihah?] My brain fumbled with the unfamiliar name, before slowly realizing that it probably belonged to the shiny Skarmorry from earlier. [Theâ€|other one?] I shook my head to focus my senses. [The other Skarmorry?]

[Yes. She is pregnant with my offspring, and I wish to father our young.]

My eyes shot open, and any hints of drowsiness were banished instantly. [W-what? How can you tell, you've only known her for-]

[You know the cycle of life is quickened with Pokemon. Within a week she will give birth, the signs are already noticeable.] Skarr mentioned calmly. I gulped, unsure of what to say.

[You wish to stay on the Sevvi Islands then? Raise a family with Karlihahâ€| will I ever see you again, Skarr?] I felt my eyes grow misty at the thought of losing my good friend.

[Don't be foolish. Most Pokemon need not raise their young, for they retain the memories of their parents. This is how younger Pokemon navigate the world, find food and shelter.]

[You don't raise your young?] I asked, hesitantly.

[We do, but for only a fraction of the times humans spend. One of your months should more than suffice.]

[How will we meet each other again, Skarr? Should I leave my cellphone? Can you, um]

[The sun and stars shall guide me back to Kanto, and your thoughts will guide me back to you.] He brushed my shoulder with his long, iron neck.

[Do you need anything from me? I have some stuff in my back-pack]

[All I ask is your blessing in the creation of life, and the hope that they shall have good lives in the wild, or meet trainers of pure heart, such as yourself.] Skarr eloquently thought. Tears welled up in my eyes.

[This is not a parting, or a time for sadness, it is a time for celebration in the creation of life bore anew. Part of my purpose here in this life is the succession of my lineage, and in doing this I complete yet another chapter in the novel of my life. I shall find you again, Josh.] His orange, piercing eyes gazed into my own. [Do you bless me in this endeavor?]

[I do.] My eyes shut themselves in an attempt not to cry. [May you be successful in the creation of new life, and may your children appreciate the amazing father they are about to have.]

Skarr hugged me with his silver, polished wings as tears rolled my face. The first light of dawn illuminated the shade, covering the earth below with colors and hues. I noticed a tear in Skarr's eyes as well.

[Do not be woeful, Josh! I shall return to you. Do not halt your dreams for me; I shall join you on the way. Your blessing means more than you acknowledge!] Skarr took off into the air, and flew away to the rock where he and Karliah had made their nest. I wiped my eyes with my sleeve.

[Josh?] I felt static's consciousness seep into my own. [Are you ok? Have you been crying?]

[Yeah, just a bit. It's ok though we're fine.] I saw the last glimmer of Skarr before he disappeared into the horizon.

[Are you sure?] Static's concern fought his sleepiness in an impressive battle over his mind.

[I'm sure. You can go to sleep.] I told my Pikachu fondly.

[.k.] Within seconds he had returned to his blissful sleep. I walked back to camp and laid down, though I had no intention of sleeping. My eyes gazed into the beautiful darkness of the sky as the light of day colored it with a brilliant blue.

Wait. How would we get back to Kanto?

\* \* \*

><p>"CH-KAAAAAA!" Pikachu exclaimed, with the wind rushing through his fur. His little arms grasped the railing for dear life; his smile growing larger for each passing second.<p>

The cruise ride was expensive, but for Static it was the opportunity of a lifetime. He has never been at sea, and had always loved the ocean. For the last half hour he had stood at the helm, feeling the wind sweep his face.

[This is AWESOME! Why don't we just do THIS for the rest of our lives!?] Static shouted, eyes closed in ecstatic happiness. I smiled.

[Well, who would show the gym leaders their place?] I grinned, and Static turned to laugh.

[You mean at the bottom of my paw?]

[Of course. There's a rumor going around that Pikachu aren't good starters you know. Some say they even struggle at the first gym. You think you could beat Brock? He seems pretty toughâ€¦] I struggled to keep a straight face, but Static saw through my façade.

[Hey, last time we got me checked I was level fifty! Some stupid teen levels aren't going to cramp our style.] He faced the wind once more. [Yeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaah!]

Charmander hugged the cuff of my jeans. He was terrified of open water, a fear I thought was rather well founded until I learned he feared fish, not dying by falling overboard.

A heavy set man stomped down from the upper decks. He was dressed in blue, with a large sailing hat and a commanding aura. He scoffed when he saw Static at the helm of the ship, with the wind's current sweeping through his fur.

"That Pikachu yours, son?" The man smirked, pointing a grubby finger at me.

"Yeah." I looked at Static proudly. Nova hid behind my leg, quivering slightly. "Nova here is too." I mentioned, smiling at my timid Charmander.

"I don't mind the fire type, but it be bad manners to bring a 'lectric type on board. Gives you an advantage." He scoffed. "What brings you upon my vessel, lads?"

"Y-your vessel? Are you the captain?"

"Yessir. The finest in Sevvi Islands." He chuckled. My face turned to that of concern.

"â€¦Who's steering the ship?" I blurted rather loudly. I looked up fearfully at the neglectful captain.

"Captain's haven't steered for ages, lad. We're only needed for emergencies, everything is automated now, doncha worry." His carefree attitude unnerved me, but I kept my mouth shut. " 'Nyway, what brings

you upon my ship? Travel or pleasure?"

"Travel." I glanced at static as he laughed childishly into the open breeze. "Well, mostly." I grinned.

The captain reached into his pocket, pulling out a red and white sphere. His large fingers twirled the circular object back and forth, while his gaze remained upon me.

"Travel, eh? Usually people want to arrive somewhere a bit more hospitable. Usually people want to end up in cities, or at least small towns. You're not usual to want to end up in Pallet, son. I'm guessin' you're one of them that wants to run through the eight gym gauntlet?"

"Yes sir. Not sure if we're elite material yet, but we'll get there." I shot a smirk at static, and rubbed Charmander's head.

"Well, before ya do that, would you make an old man's day and show what kind of stuff you and yer Pokemon are made of?"

Static's ears twitched at the mention of a battle. He spun around with cheeks sparked with energy.

\* \* \*

><p>(Static POV)<p>

Only one thing could tear me away from the awesome roar of the waves, and that was the promise of a battle. People cleared a large space for us and watched in anticipation. I wouldn't let them down.

"Go! Poliwrath!" The captain ordered, tossing his Pokeball into the air. An angry looking Poliwrath immersed in a brilliant shine of red.

[Ok, standard set?] I asked Josh. [Fake out, brick break, thunderbo-]

[No. The brick break will get you too close to him.] Josh thought.

[Who cares, he's pure water. What's he gonna do, bubble me to death?]

[He's going to PUNCH you in the face. He's fighting and water.] Josh retorted. I gulped at the new knowledge. [Do NOT get in his range of his arms, I think he's going to be mainly pure attack. Just stand back and spam thunderbolt.]

[You got it!] My cheeks were already charged in anticipation.

"Piiiiii-KAH!" Blue lightning struck the Ploywrath, and he writhed in pain. His once curious expression turned to rage, and he charged at me. "Kaaaaaah!" Streams of electricity poured into him once more, but he simply strengthened his resolve and took the hit.

"Substitute, now!" I heard the captain command. The Poliwrath disappeared, and a smaller version of himself took his place. I had



never seen this attack before. Was it a trap? Do I ignore it?

[Static!] Josh thought hastily. [Destroy the substitute, NOW!]

[The substitute? Do you mean the-]

[Yes, NOW!] Josh interrupted. I focused my energy and fried the substitute. Nothing remained but a charred place on the ground. Did we win?

"WRATH!" Suddenly, the Poliwrath was behind me, and met my gut with his orange, glowing fist. Pain exploded in my stomach, and felt myself fly and crash into a metallic wall. I felt so dizzy

Josh did some quick calculations in his head revolving damage. My hazed mind brushed his how much HP did I have left?

[Somewhere between eight and fifteen.] Josh stammered. I could barely move, my arms felt so weak I was so tired

[Get UP.] Josh commanded. I struggled, and fell backwards. I felt the stomping of the Poliwrath grow closer. So tired

[GET UP.] Josh ordered, louder. I tore myself out of my disorientation, and faced my attacker. [Thunderbolt, NOW!] My electricity once again streaked across the stage and struck its target, frying what little amount was left in his HP. Poliwrath fell down, defeated.

"Kah kah" I panted, but stood up to signify that I hadn't yet fainted. I could sleep after the match, but if I collapsed now it would be considered a draw. The captain grinned, and returned the Poliwrath to his pokeball.

"Me an' Poli have done ev'ry thing together since we were lads. It takes sumtin special to beat us. I have faith in ya, kid." Josh beamed and picked me up proudly. Normally I would fight him playfully, but I had no strength left.

[Backpack] I muttered, too exhausted to explain further. Josh understood, and placed me comfortably in the bottom of his backpack. He made a small pillow for me a while ago, and I was pleased to find it amongst the clothes and sleeping bags in his backpack. I closed my eyes, and felt myself drifting to sleep almost instantly.

"I had him for a while. There was this huge power-surge, and the Pikachu were being hunted because people thought they were the cause!" Josh exclaimed. In the midst of my exhaustion I remembered how we met. I tried to listen, but I knew it was pointless. Just a little longer

"There was a stray by my house that I had been feeding for a while. I thought about capturing him earlier, but I was still in school, and I figured it would be a bit irresponsible. I just opened the door, and he ran right in..." My eyes closed for the final time that day, and I drifted to sleep. I hope I remember to tell him to repeat that story later; I always love hearing it

#### 4. This game is hilariously bad

(Skarr POV)

Pain. Suffering. Futility.

I gazed across the unforgiving ocean, blackened with the shadows of night. Who was I to introduce new life into such a cruel, unforgiving world? The ocean mirrored my reflection, and I saw a distorted gray failure staring back. I would be a terrible father. My kids would keep my memories, and all they would know me as the fool I was. Incapable of accomplishing even the simplest-

A warm bronze wing engulfed my own, and an unexpected beak and sparkling azure eyes presented themselves in front of me.

Karliah. Her name was the summons to all my hearts delight. She was my rose without thorns, the fire to my coldness, and the eclipse in my eternal darkness.

I stroked her with my neck, then we pressed our foreheads together, staring deeply into each other's eyes. How could I be so lucky, how could I have been chosen out of the billions of souls to have this angel bestowed upon myself? An eclipse to my sorrows, a sun to my darkness.

"Skarrâ€¦it's so early." She hummed in our native tongue. "Won't you go back inside and rest with me? The nest grows cold without you."

"My apologies. I didn't mean to wake you; I was just ponderingâ€¦ well, everything." I turned and casted my eyes upon the mainland. "I don't deserve this. I don't deserve to be joyful with you, to sleep here beside you in our nest. You should find someone better suited, someone as glorious and remarkable as yourselfâ€¦"

"I have." She brushed against me once more, and I didn't resist. I felt the warmth of her embrace, and it erased all the feelings of apathy and pain, if just for a moment. "Come back with me Skarr. My words are slurred with my drowsiness; it does my true thoughts and feelings a discourtesy. You are not miserable; you are amazing and as remarkable as the sun and moon. Come back with me."

"Of course, my dear." We traveled back to our meager nest, and made ourselves comfortable. She rested her head on my shoulder. Together we drifted to sleep, under the watchful eye of the setting moon, and the calm guidance of the starsâ€¦

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

A soft breeze rolled by, and the scent of forest leaves filled the winds. The grass softened my footsteps, and Static looked silently at our path ahead. Eighteen long years, and finally I could set off on my dream of beating the elite four, and having my Pokemon and myself forever carved in glory.

Charmander hugged the ground after stepping off the cruise ship. I laughed at his little gesture, and picked up both Static and in my

arms.

[This is gonna. Be. AWESOME!] Static squirmed in excitement. Nova looked longingly at me, then quickly averted his gaze. I sat Static down, and he ran around in circles joyfully. Nova stared at the ground.

"What's wrong, buddy?" I picked up nova gently, and he didn't resist. He laid limp in my arms.

[I'm not going to be a part of this, am I? You won't like me as muchâ€¦] Nova didn't cry, but he once again averted his eyes.

[Look.] I thought, reverting back to my Pokespeak. [ I don't care for you any less because you don't want to battle. It's ok. You're still a fun friend, and I wouldn't change you for the world.]

[Really?] A tearful Charmander looked back at me, and hugged me with stubby arms. [No one has ever said that to me beforeâ€¦] A big tear rolled down his orange skin, which he hastily wiped away. [Iâ€¦I want to battle.]

[Nova, no, I know why you're-]

[I know I'm low-level and I know it'll be hard, but I want to try. I want to feel the same feelings Static does when he's fighting.]

[There's really nothing like it.] Static thought, twirling a blade of grass between his paws.

[I don't want you to rush this decision, novaâ€¦] I thought cautiously.

[I'm not. I've seen the way static battles, and I want to learn. I'm scared, butâ€¦.] Nova placed his arms in front of himself, in an attempt to look brave. [I think I can do it. I want to try.]

[Well, um, yeah, sure!] I grinned at the brave little charmader, and placed him back down. [Ok. I have an EXP share from way back when, when Skarr was learning from Static.] I handed him the small TV. [It has a camera on one end to record battles. It can tell you the statistics of the Pokemon in play, the attacks and damage they're doing to each other, and they types of each Pokemon. You can learn a lot from it.]

[It won't leave my side.] Nova promised. He stared through the screen at static, who looked bored though the televised glass.

[Dude, you're level 57 already? I'm only eight! You're going to murder these gyms! AUGH, I'm so excited!] Nova squealed, jumping up and down clutching his small TV.

[Then what are we waiting for!?] Static grumbled, tugging at my jeans. [It's still early, I bet we could beat the rock gym today if we hurry!]

I laughed quietly as the two of them rushed towards the forest, completely oblivious they were headed the wrong direction. At least

heart would never be something my team lackedâ€|

\* \* \*

><p>[Instead of flailing, you could actually hit it, you know. Might be easier.] Static laughed condescendingly at Nova, who was desperately trying to prove himself by battling a wild Ratatta.<p>

[Shut up!] Nova's face blushed in an angry embarrassment as he missed yet another scratch attack. The Ratatta used quick attack again, managing to land heavier damage than normal.

[Static, play nice.] I thought, berating him. Nova stood in mid combat, panting heavily and looking exhausted. [Do you want a potion? I have a few in my pack-]

[I'm FINE.] Nova panted in irritation, staring at his purple foe with frustration. The Ratatta lunged forward, and Nova punched it square in the face with his curled claws. The Ratatta bounced backwards, allowing Nova to grab its tail, and whirl the small Pokemon once again into his irritated fist. The Ratatta collapsed in the grass, its HP no longer visible on the EXP share, which was temporarily in Static's possession.

[Yes!] Nova sighed in exhaustion and triumph. [Uhhâ€| can I have that potion now?]

[Dang, that Ratatta must have been powerful!] Static exclaimed as I handed Nova the potion. [You're already level thirty!]

[Really!?] Nova thought exuberantly, guzzling the potion.

[No. You're still level nine.] Static giggled at his little prank.

[Static, that was mean. Say something nice to Nova.] I commanded.

[No!] Static thought stubbornly.

[Say something nice or I'll put you in stasis for the rest of the day.] I pulled out his pokeball threatening.

[No.] Static remained resolute. I almost clicked the pokeball, but a better idea came to mind.

[Alright thenâ€|I'll just tell him of your first battle.]

[What? NO, that was different! My opponent was WAY stronger.]

[Level two Caterpie.] I scoffed, and I heard a snicker from Nova.

[He was at least like, level seven. And I was only three.]

[You were the level nine at the time, fighting a level two Caterpie, and you LOST.] I reminded him. He fumed, cheeks turning an orange red. [He didn't even attack until the end; you just stood there shaking while he glued you to the floor with string shot.]

[It was HARD! I didn't know what to do! You screaming 'hit it, hit it!' over and over again didn't help either! I was TRYING.] Static grumbled, crossing his arms. Nova grinned and waddled over to Static and hugged him.

[It's ok, you got better, and so can I. Together we'll be the best team ever!] Nova exclaimed happily. Static pouted, but accepted the hug.

I could just make out viridian city's Pokemon center in the distance. A beautiful reddened sky reminded me of the time; the sunset was close at hand. A few more battles for Nova, and then we would rest there for the night. I looked back at Nova and Static bickering once againâ€¦

Despite their differences they seemed like brothers alreadyâ€¦

\* \* \*

><p>"Chah!" Nova exclaimed, slicing another Kakuna's HP away. He grinned at his silver, metallic talons before they faded into his regular, off-white claws. [Look how good I am with metal claw! I can beat all these Pokemon with just one hit!] Nova exclaimed happily.<p>

[Yeah, it takes skill to beat someone who doesn't even move.] Static rolled his eyes. It was morning in the Viridian Forest, and the bug Pokemon swarmed the trees. Elder bugs were nowhere to be found, but the worms and their evolutions filled the tall grass. Static seemed more agitated than normal; his yellow tail swung back and forth like a scythe, and his paws remained curled in fists by his side. I adjusted my Pokespeak so I was just talking to him.

[Hey Static? Are you okay?]

[I'm FINE. Let's just get to the gym already.] Static fumed. [I want to punch something.]

[I was actually thinking Nova could battle Brockâ€¦] Nova needs the experience, plus he just learned metal claw-

[AUGH! All he's done for the last two days is battle! I want to battle!] Static's cheeks charged with electricity, sparking erratically. [You haven't used me at ALL in battle!]

[It's the beginning, Static! You couldn't gain any experience from battling such easy opponents. In the later gyms is when you'll be challenged, and when you'll get to use your full force. Right now though, this is the perfect chance for Nova to gain a few levels. He might not be strong enough to fight in the elite four with you and Skarr, but he should at least be able to have some fun at his lower levels.]

[Grrrrr.] Static growled in reluctant understanding. [At least let me fight the next trainer we meet.]

[There's one now.] I grinned as a heavy set boy with a bug catching net approached me.

"Hey, I saw you, you have to battle me!" The boy spoke arrogantly. Nova walked up boldly, expecting a challenge. I re-adjusted my Pokespeak to communicate with Nova.

[Lets have Static handle this one, he's been itching for a fight.] I thought to Nova. Nova looked confused, but did as I instructed. Static tossed the EXP share haphazardly to Nova, and prepared for battle.

[Those poor bugsâ€¦] I grinned to myself as Static's cheeks flared up with blue electricity.

\* \* \*

><p>[Better?] I asked Static. He stood in the middle of a small crater of charred grass, with a fainted Beedrill collapsed at his sides. He looked up and grinned.<p>

[Yeah.] He smiled mischievously. The trainer returned his fainted Pokemon to its pokeball, and stomped away angrily.

[Just a small walk to Pewter now.] I thought to Static and Nova. [You mind if Nova beats the rest of the wild bugs, Stat? I just want him to get the experience.]

[Yeah, I'm good.] Static responded. [I'm excited for the gym. This'll really be a test for you Nova. Are you up for it?]

[Y-yeah, I think so.] Nova shuddered, and then looked up at me for reassurance. I nodded my head. [Yeah, I'm ready.]

After a few more battles, we arrived in Pewter City. Static walked confidently by my side, and Nova hugged my leg as we entered the city. Suddenly, someone jumped from behind a tree and smashed into me. In my disorientation I almost lost my balance. I struggled to face my attacker, when I saw her face.

"Hey Sandy!" I laughed and returned her embrace. Static looked bewildered; I had purposely hid this little surprise to see his reaction. Wigglytuff took no time running and hugging the little electrical mouse. Wigglytuff didn't have her Pokespeak calibrated for me to hear her thoughts, but based on Static's reactions I could tell he was quite embarrassed, but also happy to see her.

"I'm glad you could make it." I smiled. "It was one hell of a ride, I wasn't sure if you could get a flying Pokemon in time."

"Nah, I wouldn't miss your first badge! Hey, where's Nova? You were telling me all about him!"

Nova peeked from behind my leg at the mention of his name. He looked up timidly at Sandy, shaking slightly.

"She's ok, go talk to her!" I told Nova encouragingly. He hesitantly waddled towards Sandy, stopping a few feet away. She approached to pat his head, and he flinched away.

"Timid little guy, isn't he?" Sandy caught Nova in her arms, and petted the top of his head gently. "Poor guy."

I nodded. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Static and Wigglytuff wrestling each other, rolling in the grass. I smiled. Nova loved the affection from Sandy, and hugged her leg to show his approval.

Sandy and I talked for a while longer, and Nova stood between us, enjoying our conversation. After awhile, I heard a buzzing sound on my Pokespeak, followed by the re-connection of Static's mind.

[Can we go to the gym already?] He groaned. I turned to see Wigglytuff sitting triumphantly on the Pikachu, bouncing on his stomach victoriously. [â€|I let her winâ€|by the wayâ€|urgggâ€|]

I giggled at Static's predicament, and he growled in reply. Sandy shot a congratulatory smile at Wigglytuff, who responded in kind.

"Yeah, alright. Are you guys ready?" Sandy nodded along with Nova. Wigglytuff bounced off Static, causing him to wince. After a second he lifted himself up, and nodded. "Alright, let's go beat Brock!"

\* \* \*

><p>Although the outside of the gym was built in the typical Pokemon Gym style, the interior was built like a cave. Novice rock trainers were hidden in hollow boulders throughout the gym, and challenged anyone that accidentally walked into their line of sight. The musty cave scent lingered in the air.<p>

[Are you ready Nova?] I smiled, pumped for my first gym battle. Although this was more a formality than anything, I was excited for Nova. This was all real for him. The possibility of him losing his first gym battle wasn't negligible; he was fighting opponents of only slightly lower level than himself, and they had a type advantage. I wouldn't lose the battle of course, I had static, but I would try my best to encourage Nova to beat the gym himself. I believed in him.

We approached Brock. He smiled condescendingly at Static and Charmander.

"You know, it's typically usual for novice trainers to have a type advantage before their first gym. Bringing a rock type and an electric type will make this battle much harder."

"I'm not a novice." I realized how stupid I sounded, an 18 year old with two Pokemon that were both 'not very effective' against rock. Oh well, it was up to me to prove him wrong.

"I suppose we'll find out." Brock swiped a pokeball from his waist and tossed it into the air. "Go, Geodude!"

"Nova! Use metal claw!" Nova rushed at the Geodude, with his claws glimmering like metallic steel. The Geodude hovered looking concerned, but making no immediate action.

"Geodude, use rock throw!" Brock ordered. The rock appeared in Geodude's hand right as Nova was about to attack.

"Chaaar!" Nova shouted as his claws collided with the Geodude. The Geodude flew backwards a few feet, and collapsed against the

wall.

[Nice hit, Nova!] I congratulated him while Brock returned the fainted Geodude to his pokeball.

[Thanks!] Nova beamed [I thought he was gonna hit me with the rock, and I was kinda scared, but I hit him first! Did you see?]

[Yes.] I smiled at his enthusiasm. [Stay focused though, you have one more to beat.]

"Go, Onix!" Brock yelled, and a giant rock snake appeared in a glow of scarlet light. The Onix roared, shaking the foundation of the gym itself.

Charmander curled up in a ball and shook, as the Onix glared at him menacingly.

[Charmander, remember, you still have the upper-hand!] I thought encouragingly. [You're faster, and have a high damaging move! Although it looks intimidating, remember you are stronger!]

[I don't feel strongerâ€¦] Charmander thought quietly.

[The feeling comes with time. Trust me. You'll be ok.]

[â€¦Ok. I trust you, Josh. What do I do?]

[Metal Claw, as soon as you can.] I thought. Nova got up and faced the Onix.

[Punch it, punch it!] Static screamed, flailing his own limbs as if to help Nova. Sandy stood tensed watching the battle intently.

"Use tackle, now!" Brock commanded the Onix, sensing Nova's intimidation. The Onix dove at Nova at full strength. My Charmander's claws shone bright sliver, and as the Onix dove upon him he smashed his claws into the side of the Onix' face, knocking the giant rock-snake to the ground.

[Did I do that!?] Nova exclaimed. [Did I just move that entire Pokemon all by myself? It's HUGE!]

[Yes you did.] I said proudly. [-But wait, watch out, it's still-]

I didn't get to complete my phrase. The Onix whipped its tail, hitting nova right in the chest and smashed him against the cave wall. I winced in sympathy, and called out to him with my Pokespeak.

[Nova!] I cried, [are you ok?!]

The dust settled, and Nova was still standing. He had a different look in his eye. No longer one of fear or bewilderment, but one of confidence.

[That barely even hurt!] Nova exclaimed happily. [This is easy!]

The Onix reared up once again, and dove at Nova. Nova sidestepped the snake, and punched it again with his metal claws.



The snake slammed against the ground, bounced slightly, then skidded the rest of the way across the gym floor before hitting the opposing wall. Nova beamed, holding his claws in front of his face happily.

"Onix, return." Brock commanded, and returned the fainted Pokemon to its pokeball. He looked up and smiled. "Alright, perhaps not a novice. It appears you know your way around the battlefield."

"We're getting there." I smiled at Nova, who had a huge grin on his face.

"Well, I believe I owe you a badge, trainer." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a Boulderbadge, and flipped it into my open palm. "You know what you're doing. Good luck out there."

"Thanks!" I grinned, and pocketed the badge. Static gave Nova a congratulatory hug, and Sandy complemented his battling style.

All and all, a good day.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

[A c-c-cave?] Nova sputtered.

[Yeah, it's called Mt. Moon.] I answered. [It's a medium sized cave that connects this town to Cerulean. Don't worry, it's fairly well lit. Plus, we'll have a strong fire type guiding us through?] I chuckled.

[Who?] Nova asked.

[You.] I answered. Pikachu snickered through his pokespeak.

[M-me!?] Nova stuttered. [b-but It's dark in there! I can't see well, and there are dangerous Pokemon!]

[You'll be able to see fine. Plus I over-leveled you a bit so the Zubats in the cave wouldn't be a hassle. You'll be fine.]

[â€|If you say so.] Nova reluctantly answered. Sandy and I walked hand in hand in front of Nova, with Wigglytuff and Static standing to the left of us as well. They weren't holding hands, but I noticed them walking rather close and occasionally bumping into each other, resulting in a mixture of giggles.

It was a little more than a mile walk to the caves. Everyone was talking and having fun; even Nova enjoyed the conversation, though still evidently fearful of the caves. He walked closer to me than normal, and grabbed my jeans tightly with a curled paw.

[Are you okay, Nova?] I asked him in private chat. His eyes looked a bit blurred, but he continued walking on.

[Y-yeah.] He answered quietly.

[Are you okay?]

[Jâ€|just a bit scared, I guess.]

I thought for a moment, then turned public chat back on. [Hey everyone, do you wanna play a game?]

[Oooh! Oooh! What game? I'm the best at games!] Static bounced excitedly. Wiggly rolled her eyes.

[Okay, um-] I realized I didn't have an idea for a game. [Um, alright, this is how you play.] I shot Sandy a desperate look. [First, you start by, um, counting.]

[Counting?] Wiggly looked at me confused.

[Y-yeah, yeah, I've played this game before!] Sandy came to my rescue. [Um, a few people try to count to a certain number, while other people try to, umâ€|]

[Stop them!] I continued, [The other people have to stop them or distract them, and keep them from hitting their goal number. If the team counts to fifty without messing up, they win! But, if they mess up, even once, they have to go back to zero.]

[And whoever loses has to complement the other team!] Sandy finished.

[Okay!] Nova grinned. [I like this game! Who's team can I be on?]

[You can be on my team if you want.] I smiled.

[Oh what, I can't be on your team after that?] Sandy gave me an imitation glare and laughed.

[No, you can be on our team too. Are you okay by yourselves, Static and Wigglytuff?]

[Well, we're outnumbered, but we can still beat you!] Static grinned aggressively. Wigglytuff folded her paws and looked determined.

[Alright, you guys want to be the counters, and we'll be the distractors?]

[Sounds good! Ready?]

Sandy turned off her public speak discreetly. [This is SUCH a shitty gameâ€|] She laughed

[Hey, we're exactly creative geniuses over here. The point was just to have fun, and get Nova a bit distracted so he can enjoy himself and not be afraid.]

[Yeah, with a COUNTING GAME. Because, I mean, when I want to have fun, I can think of no other way then \_counting\_.]

[Shut up!] I laughed, despite myself. [Hey, you didn't come up with anything better!]

[Hey, are you guys ready?] Wigglytuff thought. I shrugged and turned my public speak back on.

[You ready Sandy?] I asked.

[Yup.]

[How about you, Nova.]

[Yeah, ready!]

[Alright, readyâ€|setâ€|GO!]

\* \* \*

><p>[One!]<p>

[Two!]

[Three!]

[Four!]

>[Three!] I scoffed.<p>

[Fou- Uh, five!]

[Six!]

[Four!] Nova grinned.

[Five! Augh, dammit!] Static cursed, fists balled by his sides.  
[One!]

[Nope!] Sandy hummed. [Now you have to say something nice about Nova.]

[Which one of us?] Wiggly pondered.

[Um, how about you, Static?] Sandy concluded.

Static grumbled. [Umâ€|I think your tail looks really cool, and I wish my tail could be on fire like yours.] He muttered.

[Alright, now you guys can start again.] I thought to the group.

[One!] Static chimed instantly.

[Two!] Wiggly said in kind.

[Two!] Nova grinned.

[T..hreeâ€|] Static concentrated.

[Four!]

[Twelve.] Sandy chuckled.

[Five!]

[Six!]

[Seven!] I added evilly.

[Eight! Wait, DAMMIT!] Static cursed, kicking the dirt in the cave. Perhaps it was spending time together, perhaps it was spending a prolonged amount of time with our minds intertwined, but somehow I always knew just when to tip him off. I snickered as he Static growled behind me.

[Do I have to complement Nova AGAIN!?] He whined.

[No, it's Wiggly's turn now.] Sandy thought. [Wiggly?]

[Um, I like the color of your fur. It's veryâ€|vibrant.] Wiggly concluded.

[T-thanks!] Nova blushed a bit, unsure of how to respond.

[Alright, again?]

[FINEâ€|] Static grumbled, then prepared himself. [One!]

\* \* \*

><p>[This game is hilariously bad.]<p>

[They LOVE it!]

[It's still hilariously bad.] Sandy thought to me quietly, laughing.

[W-wait, what if we get lost!] Nova hollered suddenly. [W-we'll be trapped in this cave forever!]

[Well, there goes that distractionâ€|] I smiled to myself, then turned public speak back on. [Don't worry about it; this cave isn't actually that big. We should be out in less than an hour, I think. Plus if we get lost, we could just follow the trail of fainted Zubats to find the way we came from.]

[We could always use your 'vibrant coat' to light our way]. Static said in a surprisingly passive aggressive way.

Pikachu snickered, along with Sandy. There really was a small trail of Zubats behind us that had challenged Nova, and met the backside of his claws. I encouraged him to use ember at first, but if he could one hit K.O. them with Iron Claw, why did I care?

[Mmmmmâ€|] Charmander murmured, concerned. [Hâ€|how far are we from the exit?]

[Just a bit more. It'll be okay, nothing scary is in here.] I reassured him.

[â€|okayâ€|]

"A little bit longer?" Sandy whispered to me, looking amused. "Do you know where we are?"

"No, I'm completely lost." I whispered to Sandy, laughing slightly about my own incompetence. "Do you have any idea?"

"Yeah, I think it's this way." She pointed towards a smaller tunnel, with a small ladder leading down. "But it's about a thirty minute walk, a bit more than a little bit more." She smiled.

After a moment, we were all standing around the ladder.

[W-what if we fall!?] Nova shuddered, staring at the ladder in horror. [We would splatter on the ground like a pancake!]

[Nova, it's like a seven foot drop] Static grumbled. [I think it's more for us to get up then to get down. We could just FALL and probably be fine.]

[Let's climb down just to be safe, alright guys?] I said.

[Wussssss! It's seven feet, I've been PUNCHED farther distances then that and I was fine. Watch!] Static dashed in front and hopped down the hole.

"Static, NO!" I cried, but he had already jumped. I instantly heard a low moan coming from the bottom of the ladder.

"Static! Shit!" I jumped down immediately, momentarily disregarding my own safety. Luckily I landed on my feet and knelt upon impact, unlike Static who appeared to have landed on his arm. "Static, are you-

[I'm fine] He grunted. [..don't make such a big deal about it, sheesh] He got up with his other arm, and dusted himself off. I noticed the arm he landed on hung limply at his side.

[Static] I motioned at his arm. [Are you sure you're-]

[I'm fine!] He motioned me to shut up with his injured arm, then unintentionally winced in pain. I shot him a look of concern, which he matched with a glare. I decided to drop the issue.

"Augh, dammit Josh!" I heard Sandy's voice echoing above. "Are you guys ok down there?!"

"Ummmm" I glanced once more at Static, who returned another annoyed glare. "yeah, we're okay!"

Sandy and Wiggly climbed down, followed by a hesitant Nova, whom I guided down carefully.

With the dim torchlight mixed with Nova's tail, we forged on...

## 5. What are you even doing

(Static POV)

With everyone safely down from the ladder we started walking again except Nova, who kind of awkwardly shuffled down the cave with his hands timidly held near the fork of his legs. Josh walked hand in hand with Sandy. Wigglytuff brushed against me, and I moved away. I

didn't want to hold her paw right now. I wasâ€¦I don't know. I didn't like the thing she said about Novaâ€¦she never called my fur vibrantâ€¦

I cradled my hurting arm.

[Ok, yeah, this is the right way.] Sandy voiced confidently. [Yeah, it should only be like twenty minutes now, we're pretty close.]

[Twenty minutes!?] Nova whined, cowering from the darkness.

[It's just a bit more, Nova. We're closer to the exit than the entrance now. You'll be okay.]

[Okayâ€¦] Nova whispered quietly.

[Hey Statâ€¦] Wiggly whispered only to me, [S-speaking of okay, a-are you mad? Or hurt?]

[I'm fine.] I stomped away, but then felt a strong paw pull me back.

[Hey, um, Sandy and other guy, um, um, Josh!] Wigglytuff sputtered, [There's an item over there!]

[Where?!] Josh's head whipped around. Sandy elbowed him and messed with her pokespeak, thinking something privately.

[It was over there!] Wigglytuff insisted. [Here, Static and I will go and get it!]

[What?] I thought bewildered as Wigglytuff dragged me behind a mound of rocks.

[Alright, make sure to bring it back!] Sandy shouted at Wiggly. Wiggle shot an annoyed thought at Sandy. Once we were alone Wigglytuff changing her Pokespeak once more so she was just talking to me.

[Are you mad at me?] She looked apologetic with her wide, blue eyes.

[â€¦No.] I thought stubbornly, rubbing my arm. [Now where is the item you were talking about? Is it like a pokeball, or a rarecandy, or-]

[I made it up.] She thought guiltily. [I wanted to get us alone. Youâ€¦ you kept bating my paw away when I tried to hold yours, and when I would bump into you, you would just move awayâ€¦] She turned away and stared sadly at the ground.

[Iâ€¦] I grumbled, trying not to appear weak. [I'm just mad I guess about that thing you said about Nova. I thought we were, like, something, but you've never said that stuff about meâ€¦] I trailed off, staring away so she couldn't see my expression. I wasn't sad!

I WASN'T!

But I wasâ€¦I don't know. I wasn't mad, I mean, maybe I was a little

bit, but that wasn't all. I wanted her to wantâ€¦ me. Why did she say that about him, but never to me? Was Nova better than me?

[It was a game, I had to say something. I didn't mean that you weren't vibrant, I just, I don't know, I thought you knew that. Really! Please don't be madâ€¦] She took my hurt arm in her own, and rubbed it gently.

[I'm not madâ€¦] I said again. [I just, I don't know. What if you really like him more than me?]

[Now, why would I like him at allâ€¦] Her voice took on a more flirty, cute tone. [â€¦when I have an awesome, brave, smexy Pikachu right here?] She let go of my arm, and grabbed my ear playfully, gnawing on the tip. [He's way too much of a scaredy cat for me. I need someone braveâ€¦] She pressed me against the smooth cavern wall. [Strong!] She pressed me further into the rock, her face inches from my own. [Someone who could decimate the whole Zubat population in here with just a thunderbolt!]

I didn't know what decimate meant, but it sounded cool!

[Me?] I asked, feeling stronger and more confident than ever. She held both my hands, and pressed herself closer to me.

[You.] She answered, and she kissed me again, behind the rocksâ€¦

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

[Hey guys! It turns out it was just an Everstone, so we left it.] Static announced, coming back to the group. His paw was in Wigglytuff's once again, so I suppose he wasn't mad at her anymore.

That's good I guess.

As we advanced, the cave grew darker and colder. The torches were more spread out, and it was really scary. I moved closer to Josh and hugged his leg for comfort.

"Hey, it's alright." Josh reached down and rubbed my head. "We're almost done. We should be out in less than fifteen minutes, I think."

[I'm scared.] I hugged the cuff of his jeans tighter. What dark Pokemon lurked in these caves? Surely I couldn't fight them all off, and eventually Static would get tired. What if we got lost? What if this wasn't the way, and we couldn't get back? What if we could never see the sun again?

â€¦would we starve to death down here? Would we have to eat each other? Whatâ€¦what if-

Tears brimmed in my eyes as I considered the different possibilities. I tried not to slow Josh down too much by holding his leg, but I was so scaredâ€¦

[Canâ€¦ can you talk to me Josh? It's less scary when I hear your

voice.]

[Yeah, sure.] Josh answered reassuringly. [What would you like to hear?]

[â€|Can you tell me a story?]

[Sure. ] Josh smiled mysteriously. [Static's gonna have to help me with this one though.]

[Oh good, I like hearing him talk too.] I smiled.

[Huh? What story?] Static questioned.

[Waaaaay back whenâ€|] Josh started. [When I wasâ€| how old was I, Stat? Thirteen? Fourteen?]

[I love this one.] Static grinned. [I don't know, thirteen?]

[Ok, thirteen. Back when I was thirteen, still in middle school, I was doing-]

[Lemme start, lemme start!] Static begged.

[Alright, go for it.] Josh answered.

[Ok, ok, ok.] Static waved his arms around, setting the scene. [Ok. Back when I was wild, I was a part of this big group of Pikachu, right? We would go around and find food and hang out. Finding food wasn't that hard, because we had this HUUUGE apple orchard where we would hang out. The farmer there was really nice, and he would let us eat his apples if we powered some stuff of his every once in a while. It was a cool arrangement.]

[One day, a rival clan came to our orchard. They were mean to the farmer. Well, not mean, I guess.] Static scratched his ear. [They played pranks on him and stuff. Overload his electronic stuff, and mess with his things. It was kinda sad because he was old and he couldn't really do anything about it.]

[A lot of other Pikachu though it was funny though. Most elected to stay with the other clan, to play pranks and mess around. I wanted to stay with the old clan, but we had so few members we kind of just fell apartâ€|]

[The farmer started getting mad. He called the police one time, and they caught a few of the Pikachu that had messed with the farmer's stuff. They sent them really far away in a truck, I don't know where. The other Pikachu were PIIIIIISSSED. They made it out that humans were at fault, and wanted to do something BIG. Like, not a prank, but actually hurt someone.]

[I tried to talk to them, but at this point, I wasn't asâ€|umâ€|]

[Strong?] Josh offered.

[â€|sure, 'strong' as I am now. They beat the crap out of me.] Static laughed a bit. [After that, they decided to head to the power station to try to overload it. If they could, it would shut down power for



half of the cityâ€|]

[Well, I couldn't do anything. As a lone Pikachu, I tried to make peace with the farmer and stay on his orchard, but he just saw me as another trouble making Pikachu and made me leave.]

[After a while I got really hungry. It was hard, not having a group that you could rely on.] He said sadly. [After not finding any real food for like three days, I headed into the city. I saw a small house with an apple tree near it, and it reminded me of the orchard. I knew I couldn't stay there, but what could one apple do, right? I was REALLY hungry too. So, I went to grab one.]

[So you can imagine MY surprise,] Josh continued, [Me, a young city kid looking out his window to see a wild Pikachu going to take some of my apples!] He laughed, along with static.

[Right, yeah. So I go up to grab one, and a HUMAN runs out of the house with a broom.] Static giggled. [I had NO idea what to do. I didn't even know what a broom WAS at this point. I just froze!]

[And I saw him there, looking guilty, about to take an appleâ€|] Josh smiled, [And I noticed he was probably just hungry. You usually see Pikachu in packs, and it was strange seeing one alone. So I picked an apple and handed it to him. I was a bit afraid he would shock me or something-]

[Oh, like I would ever shock YOU.] Static thought sarcastically.

[RIGHT.] Josh rolled his eyes. [Anyway, I gave him the apple, and he looked so happy! He ate it right there, in front of me. This was the first time I had ever seen a wild Pokemon this close, and it just walked up and ate from my hand! I had had dreams of being a Pokemon trainer long before this point, but my parents forbade me to have a Pokemon until I had finished schoolingâ€|]

[Anyway.] Static interrupted. [So this human just gives me the apple, and I was SO thankful! I mean, he could have hit me with the broom-thing, or like, kicked me out, or called the police like the farmerâ€|] Static sighed happily. [But no, he gave me the apple.]

[So, every once in a while, this Pikachu would come over, knock on the door like a little human, and ask very politely in his little Pikachu voice for an apple.] Josh laughed. [Or, at least that was what I think he was saying. We didn't have Pokespeaks yet, so in honesty he could have just been saying something vulgar, and all I would have heard was 'Pika, pi!']

[No, I was asking for an apple.] Static smirked. [And he would give me one. After a while I found a good source of berries near a river close to the city. I didn't need to go get apples any more. But I missed my human.] Static smiled, and mouthed 'my human' testing the odd words in his mouth.

[So, I went back. I didn't realize he had school then, so I would just sit on his porch and wait for him. He tried offering me an apple again, but I shook my head and just sat beside him.]

[This continued for a while.] Josh recalled. [Most of the time he just sit on my desk and purr while I petted him during the time I did my homework. I had to be careful though, if my parents saw me keeping a wild Pokemon in the house, they would FLIP.]

[Other times he would come over and talk a STORM though!] Josh chuckled.

[Oh yeah!] Static remembered. [It was about the new clan!]

[Were you trying to warn me or something?] Josh asked.

[Noâ€¦] Static admitted. [I was mostly just complaining about them. They were mean.]

Josh smiled and continued. [ Anyway, so this continued for a while, but then there was a CATASTROPHIC power failure all across the city. The police reported that a group of Pikachu were the culprits, and that they should be captured with any means necessary.]

[We were hunted with GUNS!] Static shouted angrily. [Guns! Can you believe it!?!]

[Anyway, it was rough.] Josh interjected. [Once Static found out about it, he ran and hid in my bedroom corner. I knew he didn't have anything to do with the power failure, because he was with me at the time. Still, harboring a Pikachu at this time was a punishable offense; I could have even gone to jail. Buuuut I kept him safe. It was at this time I used my allowance to by us both Pokespeaks so I could explain the situation to Static so he could understand.]

[So I couldn't leave, or else they would find and maybe kill me.] Static gulped. [I was a little scared to be staying with a HUMAN, but he treated me really well.] Static purred. [He gave me milk to drink, and apples, and cooked fish to eat!]

[During the search, when Pikachu was on my desk when I was studying, my dad burst in!] Josh recalled, biting his lip. [He glared at the Pikachu, then me, then demanded if this was the Pikachu responsible for the power failure. I said no, and that this Pikachu was innocent. He looked so mad!] Josh shuddered. [He asked if I was taking good care of it, and I said yesâ€¦] then he patted the Pikachu on the head, and told me not to tell mom.] Josh chuckled.

[After they found the Pikachu responsible for the power surge, they relocated them deep into the wilderness. After that, it became acceptable to have Pikachu again! I trained and got my license, and the rest is history.] Josh smiled, and Static beamed up at him.

'\_Someday, I'll have an awesome story like that\_' I vowed. I noticed I wasn't holding on to Josh's leg anymore, and the cave was getting a little bit lighterâ€¦]

(Josh POV)

[â€¦J-josh?] I heard Nova whimper from my right. He looked calmer then before, but his eyes still showed a glimmer of fear.

[Yeah, Nova?]

[H-how much longer?]

[We're really close.] I assured him.

[â€|okâ€|] He murmured quietly.

[Hey Nova?] I smiled, nudging him lightly with my foot.

[Mmmm?]

[What's that little bit of light over there?] I asked, though I already knew the answer.

[IS THAT IT!] He squealed, running towards the light of the cavern's end. He laughed as the sunlight grazed his skin, and collapsed content on the ground. [Oh man, I am so glad to see the sun againâ€|] He sighed, content. Everyone else joined him in a moment, walking at our leisurely pace.

[Excited to be out, Nova?] Wiggly smiled.

[Yeahâ€|]

[That wasn't THAT bad, was it?] Static looked inquisitively at the small orange creature.

[Well, no, I guess notâ€|] Nova fumbled, [I mean, I was scared, but I guess it wasn't \_that\_ scaryâ€|I'm just a wuss I guessâ€|]

[Little bit.] Static rolled his eyes at Nova.

[Static, apologize.] I ordered. [And no Nova, you're not a wuss. You're very brave for going through that cave.]

[Even though there was nothing in it but Zubatsâ€|] Static muttered.

[Static...] I warned.

[Alright, good job and allâ€|] Static groaned .

[Thanks Static. I know Josh kind of forced you, but that still means a lot.]

[Yeah, yeahâ€|] Static thought, shrugging off the sediment. [Come on, race you all to Celadon!]

\* \* \*

><p>We walked across the fresh Cerulian grass for a while longer, chatting and enjoying each other's company. We traded jokes, and laughed at each other's antics.<p>

Unfortunately, it couldn't last forever.

"Hey, Joshâ€|" Sandy sighed, getting my attention, "I have to be heading outâ€| I probably should have left a while ago, actually."

"Augh, so soon?"

"Well, some of us have to actually WORK, you know. We can't all be battling all the time for pleasure like you."

"The world would have more shattered trees and dented walls, that's for sure." I laughed. "What do you do, anyway?"

"I'm a hard worker." Sandy smiled. "I have to make sure everything goes smoothly."

"That's specific?" I smiled sarcastically.

"I'll tell you more about it later, right now I have to leave."

[I don't want to leave] Wigglytuff pouted, looking gloomily at Static. Static shared the same expression.

"Don't worry, we'll be back soon." Sandy said, planting a kiss on my lips. "I promise."

She pulled a pokeball out of her belt, and tossed it in the air, revealing a gigantic orange dragon.

"ZAAAAAAAARD!" It roared, shaking the ground upon its release. I stood momentarily petrified in fear.

The Charzard turned to me, and grinned a mouthful of pointed teeth.

"You have a Charzard?!" I yelped.

"Nah, She's a friend's actually. Same one that loaned me the Clefairy and the Krookidle. She knows I like battling, and she's generous, haha."

"Do you own ANY of the Pokemon you battle with?" I laughed.

"Yes! Wiggly is mine. She's my first, and favorite." Wigglytuff happily hopped into Sandy's arms. "Errr, no offense Zara."

[None taken.] The Charzard's thoughts rumbled as loud as her voice in my mind. [I know I am not yours to possess; It makes me more pleasure to know my master is the one who cares for me the most. To you I am just for travel as she dictated.]

"Right" Sandy mumbled. The Charzard continued to stand valiantly against the sun, as if made of stone. Sandy turned her attention back to me. "So, yeah. I'll catch you later, alright?"

"Alright. Promise to check your texts every millennia, alright?"

"No promises!" Sandy laughed, mounting the Charzard. "Alright, see you! Wigglytuff, return!"

Wigglytuff disappeared in a flash of red light, and static was left in mid embrace with just the wind.

"Bye!" I yelled up to the clouds as she took off. The Charzard's

strength was admirable; within just a few beats of her wings she had flown a great distance.

Static looked sadly at his hands. [Soâ€|now what?] He asked. [Now we go to the gym?]

"Ehhh, let's sleep first. It's getting late, plus you should have your full strength for the battle tomorrow."

[You mean Nova?]

"No." Static and Nova both turned with a look of surprise, though Nova's gaze looked like one more of relief.

[What do you mean 'no'?] Static blurted, [Do you want me to fight?]

"Well, Nova has a natural 3x disadvantage with no super effective attack, and he's scared of fish, so I thought it might be best to leave him out of this one."

[Thanks.] Nova whispered quietly, just to me. He hugged the cuff of my jeans.

[Alright, I get to fry some fish! Where's the nearest gym?] Static smirked, in a pouncing stance.

"Sleep first, Stat."

[Augh, yes MOM.] Static stuck his tongue out at me, grinning.

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova's POV)<p>

It was SUPER late once we finally reached the Pokemon Center. The sun had long since set, and the moon cast terrifying shadows across the once crisp, green grass.

The light of the Pokemon Center was a much needed relief after walking for so long in the shadows. Every moment out there if felt like something was behind us, ready to eat me or Josh or static, or hurt us, or scare us.

At least we were together, though. Josh was there, and he's big and strong. And Static was there too.

Static made me feel safeâ€|

[Alright, we made it! See, it wasn't that long.] Josh announced confidently. I swallowed my disagreement and walked in.

"Hello!" A friendly looking nurse at the counter waved. "Are you looking for a room?"

"Yes please, thanks." Josh replied. "How much for a room with three beds?"

"We, um, don't allow that here."

"â€|Sleeping?"

"No, humans and Pokemon sleeping in the same room."

Josh gave her dubious look.

"It's not racist, it's a new policy." The nurse explained.

"It's still a bit racist, don't you think?" Josh questioned,  
"Segregated rooms?"

"â€|Look, this will all blow over soon." The nurse sighed. "It's just a temporary precaution because of the incident last week."

"What incident?"

"A week ago a trainer came here with his Gardevoir and-"

"OK, SEGREGATED ROOMS!" Josh interrupted, slamming his hands over his ears. "NOT A PROBLEM, just don't explain further, please."

"Will do, I hate retelling it anyway. Two rooms?"

"Yes please."

She handed Josh the two pieces of plastic, and he handed one to Static. I stared at the plastic rectangle in his hand.

[Hey Static?] I prodded.

[Yeah?]

[What's that thing you're holding?]

[It's the key to our room.]

[Key? But it's a piece of plastic! Won't it bend?]

Static gave me a stare as if I was an idiot, and turned away. I still didn't understand, and now I just felt stupid.

True to his word, Static slipped the piece of plastic into a hole in the door, and the door opened. It confused me, but I decided to just shut up about it.

"Alright guys, I guess I'll see you in the morning? Don't stay up too late you two, gym battle tomorrow!"

[OOOOH yeah, better watch out for those level twenty water Pokemon.] Static rolled his eyes. [I'll need to be at my best to face those guys.]

"Be modest, Static. Plus you've never fought these Pokemon before, AND Misty is supposed to be a very good trainer."

[We'll test that tomorrow.] Static grinned. [Night Josh!]

[Night Static! Night Nova!]

Josh closed his door, and Static and I entered our own room. Static

tossed the 'key' onto the table, and jumped onto one of the mattresses. I stared at the piece of plastic.

[It's an ELECTRONIC key, sheesh. It works with electricity and stuff.] Static barked, seeing my continued interest in the key.

[But how does it work?]

[With likeâ€¦I don't know. Magnets and stuffâ€¦I guess. Human stuff. Augh, I'm tired.] Static yawned, exposing his small, pointy teeth. [There'sâ€¦no reason for us to stay up, right?]

[No. I'm pretty tired too, actually.]

[Awesome, let's go to sleep then. The faster we get too sleep, the faster we get to fight the next Gym!] Static's arm rested limply off the bed, and I looked at it longingly before I curled up in my own bed.

[Lights out?] He asked.

[Yeah.]

The room became instantly pitch black, and deathly silent. I thought about Static's paw againâ€¦

[Heyâ€¦hey Static?] I asked hesitantly.

[Yeah? What's up?]

[â€¦do you think we could ever hold hands?]

[Huh?]

[Like you do with Wigglytuff. Just kind of walk, and hold handsâ€¦together.]

[No, Pokemon don't do that with others of the same gender.]

[Why not?]

Static paused for a moment.

[I don't knowâ€¦] He responded. [It'sâ€¦weird.]

[Why?]

[I don't know, people just don't do it.]

[but we're not people-]

[You know what I meant.] Static barked. I sunk deeper in my bed. [Plus I'm dating Wiggly, and you're not supposed to hold hands with two people.]

[Why?]

[Because people don't do it!]

[People are stupid. Why do we have to do what they say?]

[â€|Go to sleep.] Static ordered, exasperated. I sighed and curled up beside my pillow.

I laid silently for a moment, thinking.

[What if I could get Wiggly to say it was okay? Could we all hold hands togeth-]

[Hey Nova?] Static interrupted.

[Yeah?]

[Shut up.]

[Okayâ€|] I mumbled.

'\_â€|Well, at least I could hold my own handâ€|' \_I thought to myself, as I sighed and drifted to sleep.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

[Hey. Hey. Hey Josh. Hey.]

I mumbled something incoherent and rolled over.

\_Let me sleepâ€|\_

[Hey. Hey. Hey. Hey Josh.]

I growled and turned around to see Static grinning, standing on one side of my bed. Nova stood on the floor, awkwardly looking from side to side.

"Auugh. What time is itâ€|?" I mumbled, fumbling with the alarm clock next to my bed. It read 6:30. I groaned.

[Hey. Hey Josh.] Static continued pestering.

[â€|.Whaaaaaatâ€|?]

[We get to fight a gym today!]

[It doesn't even open until 10, lets sleep for a bit longerâ€|]

[Nope, it opens at 6! I checked with the nice nurse at the counter. Come on, let's go!]

Augh, he called my bluff. Cursing quietly under my breath, I pulled off the warm, morning sheets.

[Wait.] I thought, slowly coming back to my senses, [How did you guys even get in here?]

Nova began to mutter an apology, but Static elbowed him before he could finish. [I fixed the lock so it would let us in.]



[You 'fixed' it?]

[Yup!] Static smiled.

[Andâ€|how did you go about this?] I stood up, putting an arm firmly at my hip.

[Well, you know how the lock on the door didn't let people in before?]

[Yesâ€|]

[Now it does! I fixed it!]

I sighed, and checked the electronic lock in the door, and as I suspected it smoldered with a recent electric attack.

[I didn't think it was a good idea, but I didn't stop him. I'm really sorryâ€|] Nova thought just to me, cowering down. I glanced at him, back to the smoldering lock, and then back at static, who was grinning in accomplishment.

[Static, you know what you did was wrong.]

[What do you mean?!] Static exclaimed, feigning outrage. [I fixed it!]

[No, you broke it.]

[Nuh-ah!]

[Static.] I explained calmly. [What are locks supposed to do?]

[I don't knowâ€|]

[Think about it.]

[Lockâ€|things? I guess?]

[Good. Now what does the lock do?]

[Opensâ€|]

[And what is the conclusion?]

[I might have broken the lockâ€|]

[And then what do you say?]

Static mumbled something incoherently.

[What?] I asked again.

[I was just trying to get in-] He argued.

[What do you say?]

[Sorry for breaking the lockâ€|] He replied, mildly sarcastically.

[Alright.] I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. [Now go apologize to the nurse.]

[What?!]

[Go on. I'll finish up getting ready and meet you there. We'll fight the gym after.]

[Augh, fineâ€¦| come on, Nova.] Static sighed, motioning to Nova to follow him. Nova shot me one last apologetic grimace, and turned to walk to the front desk with static. Once they were gone, I laughed quietly to myself while packing my things.

The lock was almost disintegrated. Static sure did 'fix' it alrightâ€¦|

\* \* \*

><p>[Sorryâ€¦|] Static mumbled behind me. I ignored him. [Look, I didn't know it would be so expensive, ok?]<p>

[You can make it up by beating this gym.] I grumbled. The broken lock had cost far more than either of us had anticipated, and used up nearly half of the traveling money I had saved for our adventure.

[Will do.] He said quietly. Charmander remained silent, carefully stepping behind us.

As we entered the gym we were greeted with beautiful statues of Pokemon and people as fountains. Different sculptures decorated the walls, each allowing water to flow through their hands or mouths. All of these golden statues lead up to a giant one formed of a Gyarados several feet taller than all the others. In the middle of the room there stood a glistening pool of water, speckled with a few water type trainers. They all looked anxiously as we walked into the arena.

"A Charmander, huh? This gym might be a bit of a challenge for you, you know. Fire has a natural weakness-"

I attempted not to roll my eyes as the trainer spoke. Nova, who accidentally wandered to the front of our little pack, scurried once again behind me in fear of his new surroundings. It didn't appear that the trainer had noticed static yet, who was a few yards away admiring one of the statues.

"â€¦|despite this, do you wish to battle?" The trainer ended.

"Hmmm? Oh, yeah sure." I answered.

"Very well. Go, Go Goldeen!"

"Go, Pikachu!"

Hearing his name, Pikachu bolted by my side, cheeks crackling with electricity. The swimmer flinched back, startled, momentarily treading water.

"Wait, you own a Pikachu?"

"Yup."

"Why did you make me give that speech then?!"

"You looked bored." I grinned.

"Augh!" The trainer yelped, annoyed. "Whatever. Goldeen, use Horn Drill!"

The Goldeen shot a confused look at the swimmer.

"Static, thunder-" I hesitated, seeing all the humans in the pool. Would a thunder shock hit all of them too?

"Umâ€¦thunderâ€¦shock." I finished, hesitantly.

Static took no notice of my hesitation, and cascades of electricity poured into the pool around the Goldeen. It was an instant knockout, and the Goldeen floated to the surface, fainted.

To my relief, none of the people in the pool seemed effected. Perhaps they had some kind of plastic that prevented harm?

"What the hell. What was that!?" Someone shouted from across the pool. The swimmer and I turned our heads to see an annoyed red haired girl swimming in our direction.

"What was that!?" She demanded again, glaring at the swimmer. He glanced to the side, unsure of himself.

"What was what?" He answered awkwardly.

"That!" The red haired girl insisted. "Did you just order Goldeen to use Horn Drill?"

"â€¦yeah?"

"That Goldeen doesn't even KNOW Horn Drill, you idiot! I told you the moves she knew when I lent her to you!"

"Oh, I um, I didn't know-"

"Apparently! Augh, go get the Goldeen healed, and get back here!"

"Y-yes ma'am."

The swimmer stumbled out of the pool, and ran outside, before quickly running back inside, returning the fainted Goldeen to her Pokeball, then running back outside. The red haired girl rolled her eyes.

"I apologize for his incompetence." The red haired girl spoke through gritted teeth, "My name is Misty. Since no one else here is able to hold their own in a battle, I suppose the duty falls upon me. Are you ready, trainer?"

Static's cheeks one again sparked with the prospect of a new, challenging battle. I shot her my most charming and careless grin.

"Are we ever not?"

\* \* \*

><p>"Go! Staryu!" Misty cried, releasing an odd star shaped Pokemon into the water. Despite having a lack of fins or real limbs, it faired no difficulty staying afloat in the water. [Staryu, use water gun!]<p>

[Uhhh, just shock it like normal, right?] Static stared inquisitively at the strange new Pokemon, hesitating. [It's still a water type, right?]

[Yup.]

"Kah!" Static shouted, sending a thunderbolt into the heart of the crystal in the staryu's core. The core's gem dulled in color, and the Staryu ceased to move.

[That is one WEIRD Pokemon.] Static shook his head.

Misty returned her fainted Pokemon, and tossed another pokeball into the air. This time a larger, more agile version of the creature was released, dark purple in coloring with twice the amount of arms.

[You know what do to static!] I shouted.

"Starmie! Use water gun!" Misty retorted.

The Starmie dove at static, spraying a geiser of water out of the gem on its chest. Static dodged away and used another thunderbolt, taking aim once again at the gem in the Starmie's core. The Starmie jumped to the side, causing the thunderbolt to smash against two of its arms, causing them to disintegrate on impact.

[AUUUGH!] Static screamed in horror, [OH MY GOD! I'm SO SORRY, oh shit, are you bleeding!? C-can we bring you to the Pokemon center in time, should we carry you or do we just like-]

"Starmie, use regenerate, then water gun again!"

"Starr!" The Starmie hummed through the gem, and its strange triangular limbs appeared back where they once were. It quickly launched another water gun attack, hitting static square in the face.

"Chaaaaa!" Static shouted in outrage. [That was a dirty trick, I thought you were seriously hurt!]

The Starmie gave the impression of a snicker. Through psychic effects or otherwise, it appeared to be laughing.

"Static, use-"

[Yeah, yeah, I got it.] Static interrupted me, sending lightning seething across the water, striking the Starmie across several of its limbs and across the gem as well. The gem dimmed, and the Starmie ceased movement.

"Starmie, return." Misty called out very professionally. Static still growled annoyed, and adjusted his Pokespeak so his thoughts broadcasted to Misty as well.

[That was REALLY unfair. I thought I had like, seriously hurt that thing!] Static shouted. At this point I agreed, so I let him rant.

"Oh? I was being unfair? I would think that bringing a level fifty plus Pikachu to a water gym filled with level twenties or less would constitute as 'unfair'." She flipped her orange, dripping hair. "I had to pull something out of my sleeve, didn't I?"

[It's not OUR fault you have weak Pokemon! You shouldn't have to resort to such tricks!] Static retorted.

"Isn't it? As a gym leader I own my own Pokemon of course, but I'm forced to use lower level Pokemon against trainers as a gym leader regulation."

I smiled. "That almost sounds like a challenge. Are you saying you could beat us without the gym leader's restrictions?"

"Well, I guess there's only one way to find out." Misty swam up to her lifeguard appearing chair, and grabbed a few Great Balls hidden under the umbrella. "Does your Pikachu need healing? I know what those level twenties can do to level fifties, you knowâ€|" Misty taunted.

[I'm fine!] Static grimaced, cheeks torched with electricity.

"All right then!" Misty grinned, "Go, Lantern!"

\* \* \*

><p>[Josh! Orders!] Static yelped when I hadn't said though anything.<p>

[S-standard set three.] I gulped.

[WHY AREN'T I USING THUNDERBOLT?!]

[It heals off electric damage.] I stammered.

[What!? Augh, fine. Let's go!]

Static dove at the lantern, determined to take out this new foe. His hands smashed against the lantern stunning it momentarily, and he used the opening to bash his glowing orange fist against the top of the lantern. I bit my lip. I had already done the calculations.

With the combination of electricity, fighting, and ice, along with the upper hand advantage with fake out, Static was built to take out just about any Pokemon. I was proud of him, but when I taught him the moves so long ago I knew there were some Pokemon that he wouldn't be able to take out.

Static uses fake out brick break combo. Deals average 55 damage, max 90 if it crits. Lanturn would have about 180 health, total, which means at most static would have dealt half his total hit points.

Lanturn rebukes with surf. Deals 70 damage, about two thirds of Static's total energy. Static attacks back, deals 35 with brick break, max seventy. Even if he crits twice, the Lanturn finishes Static with a surf. Knockout.

Do I forfeit? I knew we had already lost. If Static noticed my indecision, he didn't show it.

I gulped as I watched the inevitable outcome.

\* \* \*

><p>(Static POV)<p>

"KAAAAH" I screamed, smashing my palms together in front of the lantern. It flinched, and I used the opportunity to jump on top of the fish. I grabbed its top fin to steady myself, and used my other paw to pound it with brick break.

"RERRRRRRN" It rumbled in a low tone, and the pool's water suddenly rose around me. I braced myself as the water smashed into my chest, knocking the air out of me, and sending me flying off the lantern. Another wave came and snatched me from the air, pulling me under the water.

I felt sick and weakened terribly as I struggled to the surface, lungs burning for the nonexistent oxygen under the waves. Why had that attack done so much damage? Was I meant to avoid it? I thought Josh said long ago that it was virtually impossible to dodge surf—did I remember wrong?

I trusted him. Whatever his strategy was, I knew it was the best one. My head broke from the waves, and I whirled my head around to face my opponent.

"UUUUUUURRRRRN" The lantern screeched behind me, waves once again climbing higher. My fist glowed orange again, and I punched the fish right in its mouth. Its face felt hard under my fist, and barely moved with the force of my blow.

The Lantern reared back, and the waves flew above me, ready to crash on me again. I knew I couldn't take another attack and remain conscious.

For the first time, I noticed Josh's insecurity. I noticed his mind racing with calculations, trying to find a way out for me. I noticed the waves coming ever closer, and I felt myself shrink back with fear.

I noticed, for the first time in months, I had failed him.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh's POV)<p>

I returned Static to my pokeball, shaking with guilt. I knew from the start he couldn't have won that battle. Was it cruel not to have forfeited from the start?

"Well? Send out your next Pokemon then. We haven't got all day."

Misty smiled cruelly.

"My other Pokemon is away at the moment" I stammered, thinking of Skarr. "I have no remaining Pokemon. Static was it."

"Of course you do, your Charmander is right behind you!"

Nova squealed in fright when he heard his name called, and cowered behind me.

"Nova." I motioned to my Charmander, "is only level 15. He wouldn't stand a chance against your Pokemon."

"Then do you forfeit, trainer?"

"I forfeit." I said, words tasting sickeningly bitter in my mouth. Misty smiled.

"Then you've lost against Pokemon weaker than your own. Don't underestimate your opponents."

"Noted." I sighed, and headed to the Pokemon center with my head held low.

"You forgot your badge."

I turned back. Misty was satisfied by her victory, but she didn't show any signs of gloating with this action. She held out the small, glittering badge in her hand.

"You earned this at least. You did fulfill your requirements for it."

"I'll be back for the badge, once I beat you honestly."

She smiled, knowingly. "I'll be waiting."

\* \* \*

><p>[We lost?]<p>

[Yeah.] I sighed. Pikachu had just been healed, and he sat on the counter looking crushingly disappointed. He held his head with his paws.

[I'm so sorry.] He mumbled.

[Hey, it's not your fault.] I picked him up and put him on my shoulder. [There are some Pokemon that are really tough. In that case, you didn't have the moves to take him out. It's not your fault.]

[Didn't have the moves? I was TOTALLY hurting him with brick break!]

[But he was a defensive type, Stat. Brick break isn't the best option against that type of Pokemon.]

[Then what was? Hidden power ice?]

[No, that would have been worse.] I sighed.

[What could I have done? Could I have dodged the surf?]

[Noâ€|You did your best, Static.]

[Well I don't get it!] Static yelled, suddenly outraged. [If I did my best why did we lose!?!]

[Because our team isn't complete.] I concluded. I looked back at Nova, and longingly up in the sky at a non-existent Skarmory. [Static, you were trained for speed and attack. Against most opponents, you'll beat them in one to two moves, max. That's how you fight â€" full offense.]

[Then what do we do against defensive Pokemon that I can't hurt, like that Lanturn?]

[Fire with fire, and defense with better defense.] I admitted. [That's where Skarr came in.]

[Then what.] Static pouted. [Do we wait for him to come back?]

[Naw. He'll come back when he knows it's right. Until thenâ€|]

[Next gym?] Nova asked.

[Next gym.] I concluded.

\* \* \*

><p>(Static POV)<p>

Josh glanced at his watch, then nodded, as if to check something. I glanced up and shot him a curious look.

[Just making sure we're on time.] He explained.

[In time for what?]

[The festival.]

I snorted a laugh. [People would laugh at you!]

Josh cackled with nostalgia. [Nevertheless, I still want to go to the festival, and dance before the prince!]

[She still wants to go to the festival, and dance before the prince?]

[All three were beautiful of face,] Josh continued, laughing, [but vile and black of heart. Jack on the other hand, had no father, and his mother-]

[I wishâ€|] I chimed in at the appropriate moment.

[Well, she was not quite beautifulâ€|]

[I wish my son were not a fool!] I sang, [I wish my house were not a mess, I wish the cow was full of milk, I wish-]



[Um, what are you guys even doing?] Nova interrupted our moment. We both howled with laughter.

[Sorry Nova, we should have explained.] Josh thought between laughs. [Static and I were in a play a few years ago for my school. I suppose we're both a bit nostalgic.]

[A play? Like a game?] I frowned, realizing he had probably never been to a play before.

[Um, it's like where people get on a stage and act like they're other people instead of themselves.] Josh explained, [And they tell a story, sometimes through singing.]

[So how do you win?] Nova asked curiously.

[Well, you don't really win exactly; you just watch the people perform. Or, if you're the people on the stage, you try to tell the story and act it out the best you can.]

[Cool!] Nova thought.

[Static didn't think so!] Josh laughed.

[Hey!] I shouted.

[What?] Josh challenged, [Tell me you liked going to plays and you didn't sign up with me for 'Into the Woods' just so you could show off?]

He was right of course, but I hated it. [Well, that was back then.] I stood up straighter as I walked. [I'm more cultured now.]

Josh stifled a snicker. [Oh ARE you?]

[Um, guys?] Nova politely nudged us again. [Is there a festival going on? I'm really confused.]

[Oh, yes, sorry.] Josh explained, [There is the Concord Festival in Vermilion City this weekend. It's an annual celebration of the peace between all the nations. If I'm correct, I believe this is the 23rd one, which celebrated 33 years of peace.]

[Wait. Why wouldn't it be the 33rd celebration then?] I asked, confused.

[Because we humans enjoy making events complicated for tiny electric mice.]

[HEY!] I shouted with false anger.

[Kidding, kidding. The festivals didn't start until the peace was firmly established, ten years after the war.]

[That's cool.] Nova muttered. [What's going to happen at the festival?]

[People talking, selling things, laughing, performing, having a good time.]

[Eating Charmander-on-a-stick, fun stuff.] I grinned.

[STATIC!] Josh reprimanded as Nova shook with worry. [Don't worry Nova, Static's just being an idiot, no one is eating you.]

[I know, I'm not worried about that. I'm justâ€|shy around people I guess.]

[Tell you what. You don't have to go to the festival, but if you do go and decide you don't like it, I can always return you to your pokeball and I'll send you back out after. I think you will like it though. Deal?]

[â€|Okay, deal.] Nova said after some thought. [Thanks Josh.] He smiled sheepishly.

[No problem.] Josh nodded. [We'll head to the festival tomorrow, then we'll head to the gym if we have time. If not, we'll fight the gym the next day, then start heading to Celadon.]

In the distance, a small town just broke out before the horizon. The sky was streaked with hues of reds and purples as the sun melded into the earth.

[Let's not break the locks this time, hmmm?] Josh shot an annoyed look, then smiled.

[Yeah, yeah, I knowâ€|!]

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

I slowly woke up, and stretched under the warm, soft sheets of my bed. Yawning slowly, I turned to gaze out the hotel window to see if I had to get up or not. The sky was a sickly shade of greenish gray, and blotted out any chance of sunlight, making it impossible to tell the time.

[Hey Static?] I whispered quietly. I didn't get a response, but then again maybe I was too quiet. I didn't want to say it too loud thoughâ€|

[Hey Staticâ€|!] I whispered a bit louder.

[Wâ€|what.] Static's slow, sleeping thoughts brushed against my own.

[Are you awake?]

[â€|Do I sound awakeâ€|?] He thought grumpily, pulling the sheets over his head.

'I'll wait, I guess.' I thought to myself, looking at the gloomy sky. Would the festival still be held in such bad weather? I always hated stormsâ€|the water hurt my tail, and the thunder always scared me. Why couldn't every day be filled with sunshine?

[Hey Nova, you up?] Josh's thought's hummed in my mind, vibrant and

energetic. Had he been up awhile?

[Yeah! Did you see the clouds?]

[Yeah, it looks pretty bad, huh? Luckily most of the festival stuff are in booths, plus it doesn't look like it's raining quite yet. Do you still want to go?]

I hesitated. I know Static and Josh wanted to go, but I didn't like storms. I would rather just sit in the room and curl up until it passedâ€|but I also didn't want to disappoint them. I didn't want to be the outcastâ€|

[Y-yeah, wouldn't miss it!] I lied.

[Awesome! Static is still sleeping I presume?]

[Oh yeah, he's gone.] I couldn't help grinning as I heard him snoring in the bed next to me.

[Nice. Mind letting me in so I can wake him up?]

[Sure, gimme a sec.] I hopped off the bed, and walked to the door. After struggling for a few moments, I turned the handle, and Josh walked in.

[â€|Unless, of course, you want to wake him.] Josh grinned.

[I'm, um, I'm okay.] I stammered. [You can do it.]

[Hah, if you insist.] Josh rolled his eyes, and walked up to Static's bed, redirecting his thoughts at Static. [Hey Static, we're gonna be late to school! Did you finish the project?] Josh smiled evilly. Static's eyes shot open and he swung at an invisible foe.

[Shit! Yeah, yeah, I finished it! We don't get to science until eleven, right?] Static's petrified eyes darted wildly around the room. He scrambled around getting tangled in his sheets, before falling out of bed in the tangled mess. A low groan could be heard. [Joshâ€|.] Static suddenly sounded more coherent and upset. [We're not even in school anymore, are we?]

[No, Static.] Josh grinned.

[That was mean.] Static pouted, slowly untangling himself. I smiled at their shenanigans.

[What was that about, Josh?]

[Last year, Static promised to do my science project for my birthday. It was about electricity, so I figured it would be easy for him.]

[Guilt trip guilt trip, yeah, yeah, yeah.] Static muttered.

[Let me finish.] Josh smiled. [So anyway, day we're supposed to turn it in, Static realized he forgot to do it. I woke him up in that fashion, and of course realized that he didn't do it. I got a zero on it, of course. Happy birthday to me!]

[Shut up, I said I was sorry!] Static was now freed of the blankets, and gave josh an adorably apologetic face.

[I know, but I'm still gonna make fun of you for it for the rest of time.] Josh grinned.

[You're evil.] Static concluded.

[Perhaps.] Josh smirked. [Are you up?]

[With an ulcer, yeah.] Static grumbled.

[Well, that's what Pokecenters are for.] Josh laughed. [Let's go!]

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

It had begun to pour by the time we arrived at the festival. There were many people, all smiling and laughing beneath the stalls. Most wore raincoats of all different colors, but a small few wore no protection from the elements, and laughed despite their soaked demeanor. Perhaps, if this many people could enjoy themselves, maybe I could tooâ€|

I winced as another raindrop hit my tail's flame. It burned like acid as it dissolved from my fire's warmth.

[Hey, what's that face for?] Josh asked, noticing my grimace. [Is something wrong?]

[The rainâ€|hurts my tail.] I said. I hated how pathetic I sounded...

[What do you mean?]

[It'sâ€|weird.] I explained. [My fire isn't a normal fire. It doesn't catch things on fire, or give off much heat, and it's more resistant to water. Like, if I got pushed in the pool it wouldn't go out, it would just get dimmer.]

[But the rain hurts it?]

[Mhmm, it makes the fire harder to maintain. I mean, I'm fine, I didn't mean to complainâ€|justâ€|never mind.] Josh looked concerned for a moment, before suddenly walking to one of the stands.

[Does red work for you?] Josh asked me, handing a few coins to a woman at the booth.

[What? What are you-]

Josh grabbed a small implement from the woman, stood back, and pressed a button. Suddenly the device shot out from him growing in size, and spread itself out with large, silver talons connected by sinewy red skin. I flinched backwards before realizing it was an umbrella.

"Here." Josh spoke, handing me the umbrella. I suddenly felt terrible, he was soaked. His once orange, spiky hair now clung to his

face, dripping with rain. His clothes were drenched, and his shoes squelched with every step.

[T-thanksâ€¦] I murmured, grasping the umbrella. [B-but don't you need one too?]

[Nawww, I'm fine. The rain doesn't hurt me, plus this weather is rare in Kanto. I enjoy the beautiful days, but you also learn to enjoy the rain.]

[Well, goshâ€¦thank youâ€¦]

[Don't mention it.] Josh smiled. [Hey Static, do you want a-]

[MAN, I'm a Pokemon.] Static interrupted proudly, [I don't NEED any of your human stuff. I was born outside, raised outside, and lived outside. We Pikachu are made of the harder stuff, not like wobbly knees over here.]

[Static, be nice.] Josh lectured. Static ignored him and cupped his hands, collecting the rainwater then drinking it.

[Static that's gross. If you're thirsty, just tell me and we'll get a bottle of water.]

[Man, I'm a Pokemon, I don't need your 'bottled water'!] Static retorted.

[Then you're also not going to need our 'Pokemon Centers' when you get sick.] Josh smirked. Static stuck his tongue at him. [Hey Nova, see anything you want to do?] I quickly scanned the nearby booths, and noticed many odd but fun looking games. One in particular had you try to shoot water at a mechanical Pikachu, and when you hit it enough times you won a prize. The Pikachu reminded me of Static, and made me giggle.

[Can we do that one Josh?] I asked, tugging on his pant leg and pointing to the booth.

[Yeah sure.]

\* \* \*

><p>[I can't believe you missed it with all that time!] Static yelped. [The guy even gave you extra time, since you were the only one there, and you STILL couldn't hit it!]<p>

[Staticâ€¦] Josh started. [Be ni-]

[Well, maybe I was distracted by the other annoying Pikachu dancing around while I was trying to shoot.] I retorted. I had tried for SO LONG to think of something to get Static back, but had I crossed the line? Josh gave me a shocked expression.

Static laughed. [See Josh? Nova can handle himself.]

[Evidently!] Josh flashed me a smile, and I gave a small yelp of personal victory.

[So now where to?] Static asked.

[Dunno. Nova went last, so I guess it's your turn.] Josh responded.  
[What do you want to do?]

[There was a cool booth I saw awhile back where you had to pop some balloonsâ€¦] Static trailed off. I lost interest, and turned toward the booth Static was describing to see a girl materialize out of the fabric. I jumped back startled, and looked wildly at Josh and Static for conformation of what I just saw.

[Did you see that!?] I squealed.

[What?] Josh turned, startled by my interruption of static.

[That! T-that girl just walked out of the booth!]

[Oh, they can do that.] Josh explained. [It's probably her lunch break or something.]

[No! I mean, she walked OUT of the booth! Like, she walked THROUGH the wall of the booth, like out of the curtain!]

[See, this is what happens when Pokemon drink bottled water.] Static sneered.

[I know what I saw!] I insisted, upset. Hot tears brimmed from my eyes. Josh kneeled in front of me to look at me directly.

[Can you describe once more what you saw?] He asked calmly. I took a deep breath and tried to steady my emotions.

[O-okay. I saw this girl come out of the side of the booth. She just walked out of it like it was air, and it wasâ€¦kind of scary.] I admitted. [Like, at one point half of her was in the booth, and half of her was out. It was like she was cut in half for a second, but she was fineâ€¦]

[Are you sure this is what you saw?] I nodded. [Yeah, definitely. That's her, over there. Doâ€¦do you believe me, Josh?]

Josh looked in the direction I pointed. [A Pokemon that could use that kind of shape shifting or illusions are pretty rare. Still, it's too much of a chance to let slip by. Are you positive that's what you saw?]

[Yes.] I shook with slight indecision. I did see it, right? I wasn't lyingâ€¦]

[Alright then, we have the element of surprise.] Josh grinned, grabbing an ultraball from his pack. [Static, use fake-out on that woman!]

[Have you gone INSANE!?] Static glared incredulously at Josh. [You want me to trust NOVA on this, to attack a HUMAN?]

[I want you to trust me on this. Whoever I put faith in is my concern, but I always knew you trusted me. Do you trust me, Static?]

Static gulped. ['Till the end, and back again.]

[Alright then. Static, use fake out!] Static weaved through the crowd and raced toward the girl. The girl turned and looked bewildered at the determined Pikachu racing towards her.

"Pikah!" Static exclaimed, refusing to hesitate as he attacked the girl.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh's POV)<p>

The wide eyed girl braced herself as Static ran at her full speed. Just before his palms smashed against her, a green protective sphere glistened around her. Static's paws bounced off the shield, and his momentum caused him to bounce off the shield as well, in a less than graceful display.

[Arrrrggg, it knew!] Static howled in frustration. [What's next!?!]

'So, it knows protectâ€|' I thought to myself. 'Thunderbolt is a safe option, as almost any likely Pokemon she may be is at least partially affected. There was a news report on a Latios sighting near the areaâ€|or was it a Latias? Either way, hidden power ice would be super effectiveâ€|'

'â€|but although they could shape shift, they didn't have illusionsâ€|'

[Static, use Brick Break!] I shouted. Static's palm grew orange in response, and he smashed it against the girl. I tensed up for just a momentâ€|a blow of that kind to a human may break a bone or two. I trusted Nova, but then againâ€|

"Zaaaaaah!" The girl cried in outrage, vanishing into the form off a small black fox. I breathed a sigh of relief. The fox glared at Static, clutching a small apple in its tiny mouth. Its red eyes suddenly flared, and a wave of black energy exuded from its tiny frame. The negative energy washed over static and flung him back several feet.

[Arrrrrrg!] He though, gritting his teeth. [What is that!?!]

[It's a damn nice catch.] I grinned, pressing the button on the Ultraball, causing it to enlarge. I aimed accordingly, and tossed the ball at the small fox. The fox yelped as its form deteriorated into the shining red light, and disappeared into the Ultraball. The Ultraball fell to the ground and shook, representing the struggle between the advanced technology and the Pokemon's desire to be free. Everything went momentarily silent as Static, Nova and I watched the Ultraball shake. Static looked bad after the first hitâ€|could he handle another blow? If he fainted, I could only send out Nova, and he certainly couldn't handle more than one strike from this Pokemon. Was it a mistake to engage this creature without further-

'Click.' The Ultraball stopped shaking. I stared at it in awe. We did it? A crowd of people around us suddenly cheered. I smiled, bewildered momentarily. In the heat of the moment, I had forgotten that there was a fair going on around us. As the battle commenced, a

group of people around us had huddled to watch. At our victory, they cheered, and congratulated us on the capture of what must have been a rare Pokemon.

[Nice eye, Nova!] I patted him supportively on the head. He smiled up at me, pleased that he had made me proud.

[No one answered me!] Static panted. [What WAS that thing!?] I kneeled down, and let him crawl up my arm, and hugged him appreciatively.

[Thanks, you were awesome out there.]

[No problem, it's why I'm here!] He grinned as I offered him a potion. [But seriously, what was that thing?]

[I believeâ€¦] I surmised, [that we may have captures a Zorua.]

\* \* \*

><p>"What an interesting Pokemonâ€¦I don't believe I've seen it before." The nurse at the Pokemon center muttered, examining the light signature given off by the Ultraball X-ray.<p>

"Can you heal him?" I asked.

"\_Can I heal himâ€¦\_" The nurse rolled her eyes, mocking my question. "I've spent years doing this, of course I can heal any Pokemon. She's a her, by the way."

"Oh, um, right." I gulped in unease. The nurse pushed the Ultraball in some machine, and pushed a sequence of keys. "Oh, also, can I purchase a Pokespeak for hi-, uh, for her?"

"Ah, trainers planning ahead as always." She scoffed, handing me a pokespeak as I handed her the correct amount of change. We stood silent for a moment, before the machine dinged. She took out the Ultraball and handed it to me, then put on a fake smile. "There you are, good as new. Good luck on your journey!"

"Uh, yeah, thanks, you too!" As soon as he words slipped my mouth, I mentally slapped my forehead. She gave me a confused look before I awkwardly stumbled out of the door.

\* \* \*

><p>[You are the epitome of sex appeal in human form.] Static sneered once we had walked a small distance away.<p>

"Oh shut up."

[Seriously. The way you wished the nurse to have a pleasant trip as she just sat thereâ€¦]

"Shut up."

[I particularly loved you stumbling into the automatic doors on the way out.]

"Shut up!"



[It's the small things that truly make you the sexual deviant you are.]

I snatched him from behind, and pretended like I was going to punt him.

[Hey, put me down!]

[Hey Josh?] Nova asked as Static squirmed in my arms.

[What's up, Nova?] I asked, reverting back to my Pokespeak.

[Are we gonna fight the next gym now?]

[Hmmm, I don't know. I guess it depends on how you all are feeling, plus how the new Zorua on our team feels. What do you think Static?] Static suddenly became motionless. [Static? Are you okay?]

[Nope.] He sagged, [My trainer was about to kick me. It's Pokemon abuse. I'm not fit for battle, and I'm tellin'.]

I rolled my eyes at his little prank. [Oh, are you now? Who are you going to tell?]

Static suddenly grinned. [The nurse back there, of course. By now, she must be well on her way to having a pleasant trip.]

[DAMN IT STATIC!] I tossed him in the air, and he landed expertly on his paws, cackling as he did so.

[I'm kidding of course, I'm ALWAYS ready for battle!] Electricity crackled around his body, as if to confirm his statement.

[Of course you are.] I smiled. [Alright, Nova?]

[I'm a bit scared, but I'm okay. With you to guide me, how can we fail, right?] Nova shakily responded. I shot him a reassuring smile.

[Awesome. Well, that's two of the three. I guess it's time to see what Zorua thinks!] I almost tossed the Ultraball, but suddenly hesitated.

[What, what?] Static piped up, [Throw the ball already!]

[Wellâ€¦first impressions are important. Why don't, um, why don't you sit this one out, Stat?]

[W-what do you mean, 'sit this one out'!?!]

[You're notâ€¦the best at first impressions. Using Nova as an example here. Nova, what did you think when you first saw Static, outside of the adoption place?]

[â€¦I thought he was scary.] Nova reluctantly admitted.

[OH COME ON!] Static exclaimed, [That's NOVA! He thinks EVERYTHING is scary!]

[He's kind of rightâ€¦] Nova shrugged.

[See?! Even he agrees!] Static shouted.

[Alright, let's put it this way.] I rephrased my approach, [Your first encounter with her proved that you were powerful, quick, and a force to be reckoned with in battle â€" a true Alpha. Do you think you can top that in this encounter?]

Static hesitated. [W-well, I mean ummmmmâ€¦] He thought for a moment, looked back at me, and then thought some more. [Wellâ€¦] He pondered, [â€¦maybe just this once.]

[Alright. Return!] Static disappeared in his Pokeball with a flash of red light. I turned to Nova. [Are you ready?]

Nova gulped. [Do you think she'll be nice?]

[There's only one way to find out!] I grinned. [Go, Zorua!]

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

As soon as she reappeared, she gnashed her teeth in Josh's direction. Her black fur stood on end, and her red eyes gleamed in anger and fear.

[Well, giving her the Pokespeak now might end in a few stitches. Can you talk to her Nova, try to calm her into chatting with me?] Josh asked me politely.

[Y-yeah, sure.] I answered hesitantly. I swallowed my fear, and turned toward the strange new Pokemon.

"H-hiâ€¦there." I gulped. The Zorua paid no attention to me, and continued growling at Josh. "You know, he's not too bad of a guy actually. He's a really nice trainer. The worst thing he's ever done is sneeze on me once, and even that was on accident. Plus it was my fault because I was standing too close." The Zorua stopped glaring at Josh and turned to give me a puzzled look. "Well, we were in a cave, and it was pretty musky, right?" I continued.

"Shut up." She replied curtly.

"Okay." I turned away sheepishly, and she continued to glare at Josh with distrust.

"Oh, um, I almost forgot. Can you plug something in your ear really quick?"

"What?!"

"Yeah, there's this little device the humans made that lets us talk better with this little chip-"

"Oh my gosh they've BRAINWASHED YOU!" The Zorua said in fright, "That explains why you can't shut up!"

"Hey, stop it. I'm not brainwashed, I can do whatever I want. You're being mean. Josh just wants to talk, just let him put the thing in your ear."

"Never. I'll place it in my own ear to hear his TERMS, but only after you prove you're not just his brainwashed slave."

I opened my mouth to prove myself, then quietly shut it. What could I say that would prove I wasn't brainwashed? I mean, I know I'm not brainwashed, but how could I prove it? I looked down at the grass confused.

[Hey Josh?] I asked after a moment, [How can I prove I'm not brainwashed?]

He chuckled for a moment. [Ummmmmmâ€¦I don't know. Tell her something only a Charmader would know.]

"Ok ok ok, I got it!" I turned back to her, and she gave me a disinterested stare. "Did you know Charmander generally aren't good swimmers?"

"You're an idiotâ€¦but at least you aren't brainwashed. If you were, you would have come up with something better than thatâ€¦plus I suppose I'm really out of options with you and the yellow mouse on his side." She sighed. "Tell him to toss the device by my side, and do his worst."

"It won't hurt, I promise!" I said.

"I'm sure." She muttered, giving me a disbelieving look. I shrugged.

[Hey Josh, can you toss the Pokespeak to her? She doesn't trust you enough yet for you to do it. She's pretty scared, and also a little bit mean to be honestâ€¦]

[Yeah, sure.] He reached into his pocket to grab the device, and tossed the Pokespeak onto the ground next to Zorua. She sniffed it cautiously before taking it in her paw. Cringing, she placed it onto her ear, where it clipped in place.

[There!] Josh thought triumphantly. [That wasn't so hard, right Zorua?]

[AAUAUUUUUGH! How are you speaking to me?!] She placed her paws over her head in terror, shuttering horrendously.

[Relax, it's just a machine that lets us talk. That's all. I just want to talk for now.]

[â€¦normallyâ€¦I am not allowed to speak to other leaders that are not my ownâ€¦] The Zorua whispered cautiously into Josh's and my mind.

[Why?] Josh asked curiously.

[We are led by our strongest member. She is the one that creates the largest illusions, and speaks for our clan in times of hardship or trouble.]

[Where is she?]

[She isâ€|not here.] The Zorua bowed mournfully. [I became separated from the pack. I was growing powerful, and the leader of the clan noticed I was becoming of age for evolution. She made me hold a strange stone. I don't know why, and I could be wrongâ€|] She looked aside in disgust. [I shouldn't be talking about my leader at all. I should show nothing but honesty for what she has done for our clan. Rumors break strong ties, and I have no evidence to support my claims.]

[What do you think happened?] Josh pried. The Zorua shot Josh an angry expression, then returned to a mournful state. [I thinkâ€|she may have tossed me into a bag and threw me on a boat.] She glanced to the side, as if trying to appear more noble than her statement entailed. [She prepared my food as she did all the others, and she may have given me a mixture of something to put me in a deep rest. I could be wrong of courseâ€|but she was the only one of our kind capable of pulling off such a feat. Plus, I believe I heard her laughingâ€|]

[That's terrible!] Josh exclaimed, [How did you escape?]

[Well, I awoke tied inside the bag. It took hours of chewing, but eventually I tore myself a whole and freed myself. By then, all I could see was the oceanâ€|]

[Was it scary?] I asked, shuddering as I pictured all that water.

[Yes. But the vastness of the ocean did not stir my fears, rather it was the thought I would be without my clan. We Zorua are not solitary creaturesâ€|we survive and thrive in the company of others. Once I escaped, I managed to steal some human food at one of their gatherings using an illusion. It was never enough, and even now I crave nourishment. I was never trained how to hunt, that duty fell on others in the tribe. I was trained on how to fend off other Pokemon and humans with illusions and attacksâ€|]

â€|without a leader, I fear I may not have much place in this world.]

[You have Josh!] I pointed out. The Zorua shot a frustrated look at me, and I shrunk back.

[Hey, he's right you know!] Josh grinned. [Technically, if leadership in your tribe is founded by strength, I am in procession of four different Pokemon, yourself included. If you choose to join me-]

[Choose?] She interrupted. [Don't kid me human, I have no choice.]

Josh picked up the Ultraball that belonged to the Zorua. At the push of a button, no matter where you were, that Ultraball held your signature, your DNA, who you really were. No matter where you were, you would be sent back into that ball, and placed into a stasis until summoned once again by the ball. It was a scary concept, but Josh never abused it.

Josh held up Zorua's Ultraball. [Do you understand what this is, Zorua?]

[Of course.] She hissed, [Do not take me for a fool. Even wild Pokemon understand the role of that human technology. While it is still intact-]

Josh suddenly opened the ball, and smashed the hinge against his knee. The ball snapped in half, and the circuits sparked, and then remained still. Zorua stared at Josh in confusion.

[The choice is yours.] Josh spoke honestly.

[You would allow me to escape?] The Zorua looked at him in befuddlement.

[Yes.] Josh nodded.

[Truly?]

[Yes.] Josh confirmed. The Zorua looked at him once more in confusion, and took one step back. Then another. She turned to look back at Josh.

[â€|Why should I stay?] She inquired.

[Life of adventure, name written in glory as a long term goal.] Josh grinned. [But in the short term, food every day, company, and friends. Rest on a regular basis, and you can survive without having to resort to thievery.]

The Zorua looked down into the grass, deep in thought. [Yâ€|you make a tempting offer. Foodâ€|I can handle myself, although it is hard. Company of honest individuals, even humansâ€|seems much more of a tangible reward. We were never meant to be solitary creatures, and it's been terribly lonelyâ€|butâ€|] She hesitated. [Loyalty is priced above all else in our society. Iâ€|I can't just turn on my leader, we're not allowedâ€|.]

[You never turned on your leader.] Josh pointed out. [She turned on you. You had no say, and in fact, were loyal to the end.]

She sat on the grass, thinking about Josh's words. [We are always loyal. It is the bonds that make our clan strong. Although I have been cast aside, that loyalty still resides in me, and if you graciously took me into your tribe, I would of course show the same loyalty to you, my new leader. Would you accept me?] Her red eyes gleamed, no longer tainted by fear or anger.

[I shall.] Josh grabbed another Ultraball out of his pack, bowing solemnly. He pressed the ultraball lightly on the Zorua's forehead, and she disappeared into a beam of red light.

[Soâ€|did we do it?] I asked Josh hesitantly.

[I guess so.] he smiled. [Couldn't have done it without you!]

[Thanksâ€|!] I beamed.

[You know what you have to do now of courseâ€¦]

[What?] I asked, confused.

[Now we have to think of a name.] He grinned, ['Black Hole' doesn't fit her nearly as much as 'Nova' does for you.]

I smiled at his joke, and we walked down the trail, discussing what we would do next for the day.

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

[Soâ€¦now what?] I asked. [It's getting lateishâ€¦are we still going to the Gym tonight?] I asked.

[Hah, I forgot to ask our most recent party member. Let's do it!] Josh tossed the Ultraball into the air, and it released a disoriented Zorua.

[That's going to take some getting used toâ€¦] She winced, glancing in my direction. She turned and noticed Josh, and suddenly stood up straighter. [Why did you revive me, Josh?]

[Oh, I just wanted to ask you something.] Josh answered. Zorua stood at attention, waiting for Josh's question. [Um, do you know what a Pokemon Gym is?]

[Vaguely.] She answered. [It similar to a competition, where humans and Pokemon battle for amusement, correct?]

[â€¦Somewhat, yeah. Pokemon battle alongside trainers for badges, which prove our skills. With enough badges, a trainer can challenge the Pokemon League. If they win, they will be forever remembered as one of the best of the best, and will be famous all around the world. Very few succeed. This is my dream, along with Static, my Pikachu whom you met earlier, and Skarr, my Skarmorry.] I waited for him to say my name, but he never did. Why didn't he include me?

[You quest for a valiant goal.] The Zorua spoke softly.

[Do you wish to join it?] Josh asked. [I will expect the best from you, and training will not always be fun. If you decline, you may still be part of the party. Not everyone has to enjoy battling, and even if it makes you uneasy, you are still welcome. Nova I'm sure will vouch that, although battling makes him uncomfortable, we still have fun together.]

'Iâ€¦what?' I thought with shock and disappointment. I mean, originally I was scared, but hadn't I changed since I beat the rock gym? Didn't my battle with the big Onix change anything? I wanted to believe in his dream as much as the othersâ€¦did he not believe in me? Tears brimmed in my eyes, and I turned away.

[Yes!] The Zorua spoke confidently. [I shall earn my place by making you proud in battle!]

[Excellent. I know it's late, but the Gym is still open. Would you

like to grab a bite to eat, then go to the Gym?]

[Absolutely! I'm glad I have such an early opportunity to earn my keep.] She bowed.

[Awesome! How about you, Nova? Are you still up for your second gym battle?]

I quickly wiped away the tears from my eyes, and turned back to Josh. [Y-yeah, definitely!]

[Alright!] Josh exclaimed, not noticing my prior demeanor. [And of course, if something happens, we'll have Static to back us up.] He smiled reassuringly.

'You mean, if I failâ€¦' I thought glumly, but just nodded.

## 6. Oh-One-Who-Hides-In-Garbage

(Nova POV)

We sat down at the restaurant and started eating, but I wasn't hungry. Zorua ate a lot, and Josh was enjoying his food, but I wasn't hungry. I was sad... I wanted to talk to Josh in private, but he didn't need that right now...he was happy. Why didn't he trust me? Was I not good enough, was I not the Pokemon he wanted?

...Was I not the Pokemon he was looking for in Matilda's adoption house, and he found me by accident...?

I accidentally hiccupped with a sob before regaining my composure. Josh shot me a curious look.

[J-just eating too fast, sorry.] I lied.

[Really? You've barely eaten. Are you sure you're okay?]

[Yeah, I'm fine...]

Once the rest of the food came, Josh released Static to enjoy himself, and to introduce himself more formally to Zorua. After Static yelped at Josh a bit for not letting him order his own food, everyone got along nicely. Even Static behaved himself around Zorua, and we all sat and joked, and had a pleasant conversation.

...well, all of us that mattered, I guess. I didn't talk much...

[Oh, hey!] Static thought, mouth full of the spaghetti he didn't order, [Zorua, we need to name you! It's weird saying 'Zorua' this and 'she-slash-her' that. Something like, dark-shadowy and illusiony.]

[If you care, I already possess a name.] She glanced at Static, who was covered in spaghetti meat sauce.

[Oh? Well, tell us then!]

[Par'thguanji.]

We all looked around at each other for a moment in moderate insecurity before returning our gaze to her.

[Um, sorry, I didn't catch that. Can you repeat that?]

[Par'thguanji.] She repeated. [It has a special meaning in our tongue.]

Josh gulped. [Well, then I guess you have a name. Welcome to the group, um, 'Par'thguanji'.]

Static laughed. [Yeaaaaaaah, that's so not happening. We're gonna have to shorten that...how about 'Parr' or 'Guan' or something?]

[Static, that's rude.] Josh reprimanded. [Zor-] He coughed. [Par'thguanji, what does your name symbolize?]

[It means red eyes. Most of our kind posses blue, and seeing eyes of my distinction is rare. There are tales of blue furred Zorua with red eyes, but none with red eyes and red and black fur. Thus, I was named Par'thguanji, Red Eyes.]

[Sheesh, that's a mouthful. Didn't they shorten it, or anything?] Static whined.

[Static, be polite. If she wants to be called by her \_name\_, then that's what we'll do.] Josh stated firmly.

[Well, I mean, that was my name back in the tribe. Perhaps I should be re-named as I join a new group? As a kind of indoctrination?] Zorua pondered.

[Well, we don't want to make you uncomfortable, but if you're okay with it, sure. Do you have any idea guys? Maybe, something like Rose?] Josh chimed.

Static thought for a moment. [What about Cherry?]

[How about Myst?] I blurted out. Everyone turned to stare at me, and I felt self-conscious, so I added [Because, you know, her illusions and stuff.]

[That doesn't have anything to do with red eyes.] Static retorted. [I was thinking of, like you know, something RED. Like 'Scarlet' or 'Ruby' or-]

[Well I like it.] The Zorua smiled at me, making me feel a little better. ['Myst'. It sounds mysterious and charming.]

[Would you like us to call you that, then?] Josh asked the small Zorua. [Is that the name you want?]

[Yeah. Myst. I like that.] Myst smiled.

[Alright then! Myst, Static, Nova, are you ready to conquer the gym?]

[Yeah!] Static and Myst cheered, raising their paws high. I raised my



paw as well, but didn't cheer like they did. Josh didn't notice.

[Alright then! Let's-] Josh almost completed his statement, then noticed the condition of Static's face. [-hold on a sec, let me get a napkin.]

[What?] Static questioned. Josh grabbed a napkin off another table and sat back down in his chair, facing Static.

[Hold still.] Josh commanded Static, holding his head in one hand, and the napkin in the other.

[Hey!] Static cried in annoyance. [Stop, ack, quit, quit! I can do it myself!]

[No you can't.] Josh laughed, wiping off Static's face. [Hold still, would you?]

[No! Stop, I'll shock you! Seriously, don't test me, I will! Quit!] Static yelled as Josh cleaned the rest of the spaghetti sauce off Static's face.

[There. All done.] Josh smirked.

Static growled with dismay. [Can we leave yet? Or are you not finished mutilating my face?]

[Oh Static, I couldn't do anything to make your face look any more hideous.]

[HEY!]

\* \* \*

><p>[What kind of snob generates this much trash!?] Static yelled. As offensive as his comment seemed, I kind of had to agree. There were more than thirty trashcans spread out in the middle of the gym, all filled to the brim with different types of garbage.<p>

We walked with Josh between the trashcans until we arrived at a gate of vibrating electricity. It looked like it would hurt if we touched itâ€|

â€|was our task to run right though?

[I bet I could do it.] Static thought. [It's electricity, so I shouldn't take too much damage.]

[Do you think you could turn it off from the other side?] Josh pondered.

[Probably. I'll tell you what I see once I cross.] Static crouched down, preparing to pounce.

"WAAAIT!" an electric trainers yelled, diving from his hiding place behind one of the trashcans. "Don't TOUCH the electric barrier, you idiots!"

Josh turned around to face the trainer. "Oh? And what would you

suggest we do then, one-who-hides-in-garbage?"

The trainer glared at Josh, face burning in embarrassment. "Hey, at least I didn't try to touch a 100 volt fence!"

Josh pointed to retort, then stepped back. "Wait. Did you say 100 volts?"

"Yeah!" The trainer confirmed.

Josh rolled his eyes. "Pikachu, run through the barrier."

Static jumped thorough the barrier without hesitation. Nothing happened as he passed through it unscathed. Upon landing on the other side, Static shot a confused glance at the barrier, and hesitantly touched it with his paw. Nothing happened.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?" The Trainer screamed in outrage, "That could have KILLED your Pikachu!"

"No it couldn't." Josh ignored the trainer, and walked closer to the barrier. "100 volts isn't enough to even harm my Pikachu, and it's barely enough to give humans a mild shock, similar to touching a door knob." Josh walked through the barrier unfazed.

"Y-you were supposed toâ€¦search though the garbage cansâ€¦" The Trainer mumbled to himself. Josh paid him no heed, and instead looked at Myst and me. He gave us a motion to follow him, and then walked further past the barrier. I gulped and took the first step. Electricity sparked and spattered around me, but it more tickled then hurt. I passed through unharmed along with Myst. The electricity made some of her fur stand on end, but yielded no other effect.

Josh was already talking to the gym leader by the time we crossed the barrier, with Static loyally at his side. I ran to catch up with him, and puffed up my chest in an attempt to look brave.

The gym leader was bigger than most humans I had seen. He had spiky yellow hair and a shirt covered in different shades of green. His arms were giant, almost three times as big as Josh's.

"This gym was MEANT to teach you resilience and patience in battle." The giant man rumbled at Josh. Josh stared back with resilience. "Though I suppose knowledge is as important as patience in battleâ€¦perhaps more so."

"I've studied quite a while before my journey." Josh spoke with a hint of pride. "I wanted to make sure I knew my adversaries."

"Unfortunately, not all situations present you with opportunities to study, son." The massive man tore a Pokeball off his belt. "In that situation, you have to use your gut more than your brain. My Pokemon saved me during the war. Could yours?"

"Absolutely." Josh spoke without hesitation. I couldn't help glancing away...

â€¦he meant his other Pokemon, not meâ€¦

"I'm here to test that." The electric gym leader tossed his Pokeball into the air.

\* \* \*

><p>"Go, Voltorb!" the giant man yelled, releasing a strange red and white spherical Pokemon.<p>

"You ready for this, Ssstatic?" Josh hissed Static's name. I glanced back at Josh to suddenly see two Pikachu by his side. Both perfectly resembled Static. One of the Statics noticed my confusion, and winked at me; their eyes suddenly becoming ruby red. That static turned his attention back to Josh, and his eyes melded back into electric blue.

"Voltorb, use swift!" The electric gym leader commanded. The Voltorb swiveled back, and glowing white stars sparked into existence around it and gleamed.

"Ssstatic!" Josh grinned, "Use Dark Pulse!"

One of the Statics rushed forward, cheeks exuding what appeared to be black electricity. The Static crouched down and focused, then extended his arms suddenly, releasing a wave of the black lightning. The wave zoomed across the stage, and smashed into the Voltorb, bathing it in an eerie black glow.

The wave of electricity crashed against the Voltorb, and it rolled across the stage unconscious.

[Impressive.] Josh complimented the Static as the Gym leader returned his fainted Pokemon to its pokeball.

[You should expect nothing less, my liege.] The static bowed back at Josh; his eyes glowing ruby red once more, highlighting his cautious grin.

[Excellent work nonetheless. Let's give Nova a try, shall we?] Josh hummed. [Nova, you ready?]

\_Don't screw it up, don't screw it up, don't screw it up, don't screw it up!\_

[D-definitely!] I stuttered.

[Alright!] Josh turned and pointed to the gym leader. [Prepare an ember attack on his next Pokemon!]

I sucked in a deep breath and waited for the gym leader to make a move. The gym leader thought for a moment, then reached for the second Pokeball on his belt. As soon as his Pikachu appeared on the field, I fired my ember attack.

"Sparks! Dodge with double team!" The man ordered. The Pikachu in front of me stared wide-eyed at my ember attack for only a second, then duplicated and ran around me in opposite directions. My ember attack sailed harmlessly between the both of them.

\_I missed my first attack! Josh already thinks I'm useless, now what am Iâ€|\_

[Nova!] Josh called out, [Only one Pikachu makes a sound. Figure out which, and use Ember!]

I frantically tried to focus as the two Pikachu raced around me. They both moved in Sync, but only the one on the left's paws made a sound against the polished gym floor. I took a quick breath and prepared to attack, but the Pikachu on the right was faster. He noticed my preparations for an attack, and charged at me with full speed.

'What do I do!?' I thought hastily. Josh gave me no instruction! I could still brace myself for the Pikachu's impact, or maybe I could even still hit it with ember. But waitâ€¦ was that what I was supposed to do? The Pikachu Josh told me to hit was still standing on my left, preparing a thunderbolt attackâ€¦

Making a split second decision, I fired instead at the left Pikachu. The Pikachu on the right continued his dive, but passed harmlessly though me. Just an illusion! The Pikachu on the left (the only one now remaining) noticed my ember, and accidentally dodged directly in its path. Direct hit! My attack slammed into the Pikachu on its back, and it slid along the floor.

"Hrrrrrâ€¦Kah!" The Pikachu shouted, using the momentum of my attack to flip itself back on his paws.

"Sparks, use Quick Attack!" The large man shouted. The Pikachu glanced at me, and moved WAY faster than I thought possible, and slammed into me, knocking me to the ground.

"Chaaaaâ€¦" I coughed, back smashing along the gym floor. I sat up dazed, and looked for the Pikachu.

[Nova, use Ember!] Josh called out

[Where is he!?] I yelped, eyed darting across the gym.

[Right in front-] The Pikachu suddenly slammed into me, sending me airborne across the gym. The Gym's scenery flew and twisted around me, and I noticed Josh upside-down. How high was I!? Landing badly would hurt a lotâ€¦

I leaned to my left, and curled myself in a ball trying to get my feet matching where I wanted them with the floor. With an "Oof" I managed to land on my main legs, though I had to steady myself with a paw.

'DID I JUST DO A FLIP?' I thought incredulously to myself. 'Did Josh see that!?'

"Kah!" The Pikachu snapped, sending me back into the mind frame of that battle. The Pikachu dashed at me, but all too slowly now that I saw its strategy. I took a deep breath, aimed appropriately, and my ember attack send the Pikachu reeling.

It didn't get back up. I was SO happy! I did it!

\_That wasn't an easy battle, but by the end I was TOTALLY won!\_

Hot blood seared in my veins as I awaited my next opponent. I knew I

wouldn't be felted this day, and warm fire empowered my chest. I would prove to Josh that I wasn't just a weakling or a pet, and that I valued his dream just as much as-

[Nice work, Nova. Myst, are you ready for the grand finish?]

"Kah!" Static cheered in approval.

\_â€|Wait, what? Why was he calling me back? I got hit, but I'm still okay. I can still do thisâ€|I wanted to fight! I did the flip and everything! I knew which clone to hit! Iâ€|didn't I do everything right? Why didn't he trust me? Joshâ€|\_

I slumped back to the sidelines with Myst as Static charged into battle, waiting for his next opponent.

\_Didâ€|did I not do well enough? I tried my bestâ€|\_

\_â€|amâ€|am I just not good enough?\_

\* \* \*

><p>[Myst, are you ready to finish this!?] Josh asked enthusiastically.<p>

[Absolutely.] A Charmander that wasn't me rushed onto the battlefield. How did Myst even do that? She matched everything about me perfectlyâ€|to my dark blue eyes, my light orange coat, even the scar on my left pawâ€|

The only thing she didn't have was my insecurity.

"Last Pokemon. Gotta make it count, eh?" The large, gruff man spoke, reaching for his last pokeball. "Go, Raichu!"

A Raichu materialized from out of the red light. It looked...old. Much of its fur was gray and discolored, and it had a collection of scars across its body, and there were some patches on its body that fur didn't cover. Despite this, he looked energetic and strong. He turned and gave the gym leader a sharp nod of approval before starting down at Myst.

"Rai!" He cried, cheeks sparking with electricity.

"Raichu, use thunder!" The gym leader roared.

[Myst, Dark Pulse!] Josh thought hastily.

Myst, in my form, drew a quick breath mimicking my ember attack. Instead of my normal flames however, black fire blasted out of her mouth and bashed itself against the Raichu. The Raichu reared back in anger, and prepared his counter.

As they fought, I couldn't help but feeling â€|

Lost. Alone.

Why wasn't I the one fighting? I mean, I was I guess, but just as Myst's illusion. Not the real me. The real me was just standing hereâ€|

I wished I was Myst's illusion. I wish I was brave and strong, a person Static and Myst could rely upon in battles, and the kind of Pokemon Josh wantedâ€|

â€|because Josh didn't want me. Josh wanted the Charmander in the fight, the bold and powerful Charmander fighting. Just the illusionâ€|

Tears burned again in my eyes as the fight continued. I wasn't mad at Myst, or even upset at her. She was just doing what Josh wanted, giving him the Pokemon he wanted in battle. The illusion showed what should have been. The strong Charmander by Josh's sideâ€|

I should have been the illusionâ€|

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

The Raichu reeled back from Myst's attack, but it hadn't fallen yet. The Raichu's cheeks crackled angrily with electricity as he prepared his next attack.

"Raiiii!" He shouted, blasting Myst with a deafening roar of electricity. Myst's illusion of Nova disintegrated upon impact, and the small black fox flew into the air, and crashed onto the floor immobile.

"MYST!" I shouted in shock. Had that attack truly knocked her out with a single hit? I thought my calculations were perfect; she shouldn't have fainted from-

[I'm still very much conscious, master.] Myst thought calmly in my mind. [Sorry for the faÃ§ade, gut reaction, play dead. I suppose my kind isn't one for 'honorable fighting'.] She chuckled in my mind. [Shall I get up?]

[Hah.] I smiled with pleasant surprise. [Clever, I wouldn't have thought of that. No, stay there for a second.]

[As you wish.]

"Send out your next Pokemon!" Lt. Surge boomed across the gym.

"Why, when my previous Pokemon hasn't fainted?" I asked him aloud. Confusion crossed the gym leader's face before he realized the meaning of my words. "Myst, use Dark Pulse!"

"Zah!" The small Zorua hopped nimbly to her feet, and fired a black wave upon the flat-footed Raichu. It wheeled around in surprise before getting smashed by the attack and falling to the ground unconscious.

"Hmph." The gym leader growled in grudging defeat.

[Nice work Myst!] I lowered my hand, and she ran over to meet my lower than usual high-five. She grinned, pleased to have met my approval. [You too, Nova! You handled that Pikachu nicely!] Nova turned to me and smiled appreciatively, but something didn't seem

quite right. His eyes were a bit redâ€|had he been crying?

I made myself a mental note to ask him about it later, in private.

[Anyway, you were all awesome.] I grinned, eyeing Nova and Myst. I heard a growl behind me, and turned to see Static rolling his eyes.

[Okay fine Static, you're NOT awesome. Better?] I thought sarcastically. He grinned and jumped on my shirt, clawing his way up my clothes and perching himself on my shoulder.

[Absolutely NOOOOT.] He laughed. [Come on, get the badge and let's go get smoothies.]

I grinned at Static's comment, and approached Lt. Surge. He begrudgingly handed over the badge, muttering something about the 'fairness' of battles, and how one shouldn't play tricks.

I turned to leave, but my darker half got the better of me, and I turned around just before walking out the door.

"I thought all was fair in love and WAR?" I grinned, and swiveled back around. I could faintly hear Lt. Surge cursing my name as I laughed, and left the gym.

\* \* \*

><p>[â€|I think I'm sick.]<p>

I turned to Static, surprised. Static never had gotten sick before, especially with his frequent trips to the Pokemon Centers. Sure enough, he held his banana smoothie in one hand, and rubbed his presumable runny nose with the other. I took a small sip of my fusion smoothie.

[What do you mean?] I inquired.

[I dunnoâ€|] Static mumbled quietly. [I just sickâ€|OF THESE WEAK ASS BIIIIIIIIIIITTTTTTCHHEEESSS!] He grinned wildly, jumped on my back. [COME ON, Josh! When are we gonna fight a REAL gym, where I can show them what I'M made of!?!]

I rolled my eyes. [Get off me, Stat.] I laughed, trying to catch the Pikachu clawing all over my back.

[Right away, doctor!] Static jumped off of me. [Need anything else? Defibrillator, stethoscope? I'll get it, 'Stat'!]

I groaned at his pun. [See, everyone, this is why we don't give Static sugar after ten P.M.] Myst laughed, and I could just hear Nova snicker quietly. I wonder what happened in the battle todayâ€|was he not use to getting hit in battle? Perhaps I placed him too quickly into a battle where he wasn't ready. I would talk to him later, and make sure he was okay.

The road forked ahead of us. The way I intended to go was to the Pokemon Center to rent rooms for the night. The other path took us on the road to Celadon City, through a small forest of trees. I stopped

for a moment.

[Hey guys, originally I was going to rent us rooms at the Pokemon Center, but would you guys rather take the path and get a few more miles in before we call it a night?]

[Sure!] Static called out. [We have a few more hours to burn of daylight, right?] Everyone synchronized an eye roll at the yellow mouse, as the sun had set hours ago.

I thought I felt a brush of Myst's consciousness against my own, but it was gone an instant from when it started.

[We're you going to say something, Myst?] I asked.

[â€|It's not important, never mind.] She shook her head, disregarding the thought.

[Feel free to speak up, it's your guy's call.]

She gulped. [N-normally, as followers, it is disrespectful for us to voice our opinions of the best course of action. The leader simply makes the decision for us, and we follow in our leader's footsteps. My opinion doesn't matter.]

[Of course your opinion matters! Even if I didn't ask for it, I would still value your input in any situation.] I explained.

Myst shifted awkwardly from foot to foot. [A-are you sure? Normally I would be reprimanded for thisâ€|]

[Of course. Speak your mind!]

[Well, umâ€|] Myst muttered, [I wouldâ€|preferâ€|the woods. In the future I'm sure I will become more accustomed to human architecture, but for now I would prefer the safety of the outdoorsâ€|]

[Okay, that's one vote for the outdoors. Anyone else?]

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

[Anyone else?] Josh called out, looking at us. Static piped up.

[Yeah, you're crazy Myst. Humans have SUPER comfy beds and stuff. I would prefer the Pokemon Center.]

[Oooh, one to one. Wanna break the tie, Nova?] Josh looked at me expectantly. I felt a paw nudge my side, and turned to see Myst staring quietly at me. Her eyes were no longer angry or filled with annoyed sarcasm. They were glistening, almostâ€|

â€|pleading?

[I kinda want to get to Celadon.] I chose. Static grumbled, and took an angry sip of his smoothie.

Josh shrugged his shoulders, and headed into the forest. [To Celadon,



then!]

[Thanksâ€¦] Myst thought just to me.

[No problem.] I responded. [Are youâ€¦okay?]

[Of course.] She stood up at attention. [Why wouldn't I be?]

[Just wondering.] I quietly sipped my blueberry smoothie.

Myst nudged me again, and made a motion to her smoothie, which I held. Since she couldn't hold it on her own (because she had to use all four of her paws to walk) I offered to carry hers. I lowered my paw, and she sipped some of the green, kiwi liquid.

[Why did you ask?] She pondered as she drank some of the smoothie, pawing it awkwardly as she walked.

[Wondering, I guess.] I shrugged and looked away.

[Are YOU okay?]

[â€¦yeah.] I lied. After not hearing anything for a moment, I turned around to see myself staring back. I jumped back startled. The clone of myself looked at me with sad, forlorn eyesâ€¦did I look like that?

[Do you want some of my smoothie?] My clone offered, elegantly offering me the green drink with its paw. I squinted back in confusion.

[How are you doing that?] I asked Myst. [How can you holding the smoothie in that pose?]

[â€¦A lotâ€¦ofâ€¦balanceâ€¦] The clone of me shakily responded. [Q-quick, before I fall!]

I quickly grabbed the smoothie from what looked like my outstretched hand, but I knew must have been Myst's two front paws.

[Heh, another second and I would've fallen.] My copy grinned. It looked at me with my dark blue eyes, and resumed its sad, faraway look.

[â€¦Stop doing that.] I insisted.

[Doing what?]

[The thingâ€¦with my eyes.]

[I don't know what you mean; I'm just copying you.]

[No you're not, I'm f-fine.]

"I'm f-fine." My image before me spoke in my own tongue. He stuttered when he said 'fine', and looked as if he was on the edge of tears. Did I really look that weak?

[Stop it!] I shouted, louder then I meant. Myst's illusion dissolved immediately, and was replaced by the normal image of her, looking

concerned.

[Come on. What's wrong, really?]

[I don'tâ€¦want to talk about it.] My thoughts shook as I attempted to stave off tears. I turned back to Myst, and noticed she had once again copied my form. Unlike previous times though, my copy had Myst's dark red eyes, and her intrigued, coy smile.

[Nova,-] She began, [-what is the difference between thieves and a thief?]

Her question caught me off guard. [Umâ€¦one is justâ€¦one, and the other is a bunch?]

[Close, but there's more.] My clone answered. [With one thief, they rely upon themselves to survive and thrive. The only safety net is themselves. Their wit and skill.]

[What about thieves?] I ask, now intrigued.

[They don't have to rely just upon themselves. They have a collection, a family if you will, that secures their safety and shields them from danger. Suddenly, the thief doesn't have to rely just upon themselves anymore.]

I reflected on this for a moment.

[My point isâ€¦] My clone continued, [â€¦that you're not in this alone. I'm sorry I was snarky earlier, but what could you expect from a cornered thief?] My clone grinned sheepishly. [â€¦but honestly, Josh has proven himself to be a competent leader. Static has demonstrated his strength, and you have demonstrated your will. I'm sure you don't trust me yet, I mean, you have no reason toâ€¦] My clone looked away awkwardly. [But, I'm sure eventually I will earn your trust. And I just, I guess I want you to know that. Whatever's wrong, you have a team to help you through it. And as part of the team, I'll be here to help as well.]

[T-thanks.] I looked at the ground. That's really all I wanted, just to be a part of the team. To have someone there to rely on, and that could rely on me. Static didn't need anyone but Josh, and I wasn't sure about Myst yetâ€¦]

â€¦and Josh made it clear I wasn't a part of the team. Not because I couldn't rely on others, but because others couldn't rely on me.

[Do you want to talk?] My clone asked once more. By the tenor of her tone, I could tell this would be the last time she would ask.

[Iâ€¦it's justâ€¦] My voice cracked in my mind as tears blurred my vision. [J-josh doesn't want me. He picked me, but only because I was the last choice, and he's a good guy, and he saw how Matilda-]

[Wait, wait, wait.] I saw a blurry myself with a bewildered expression with paws raised. [Josh doesn't want you? What are you talking about?]

[You see how he treats you and Staticâ€¦] I sobbed quietly. [He always expects the best out of you guys. With me in battle today, he just took me backâ€¦I still could have foughtâ€¦P-plus, what he said when he was introducing us to youâ€¦]

[What do you mean?]

[He said I wasn't part of his dream.] I was balling at this point. [Static and Skarr were a part of it, and now you're a part of itâ€¦but he never said meâ€¦]

â€¦the only time I'll ever be a part of his dream is when you're copying my shape.] I cried, turning sharply away from the bewildered version of myself. A shadow suddenly loomed over me, and I looked up to see Josh looking concerned.

## 7. Not just a pet to me

[Nova?] He asked hesitantly. Myst nudged me forward, and looked at me expectantly.

[Talk to him.] She encouraged me. I bowed ashamed, and couldn't help but cry. Josh bend down on his knees to look me in the eyes.

[Nova, what happened?] He asked, voice full of genuine concern.

[N-nothing.] I responded, stuttering even in my thoughts. I was so insecure. I wish he would just leave me alone; I didn't want this attention. Everyone stared at me, and I felt lost. [Nothing, I'm fine!]

[No you're not. Come on. I'll carry you.] Josh picked me up under the arms, and draped me over his shoulder as we walked to Celadon. I felt like I was being disrespectfulâ€¦wasn't Josh's shoulder Static's spot? I tried to wiggle free, but Josh held me firmly in place.

[When you're ready, I'll be here.] Josh thought stubbornly. I struggled a bit more against his hold, then finally accepted defeat and relaxed. My head draped itself on his chest, and my feet bumped against his back as he walked.

A few more tears fell along the path as we walked in silence. I was exhausted. I felt my eyes start to close themselves as Josh kept walking, seemingly oblivious to the burden I must have been. Eventually my mind betrayed me, and I fell asleep as the night went on.

\* \* \*

><p>When I awoke, I was already in my sleeping bag. It was still night, and I noticed Josh sitting quietly on his sleeping bag watching me.<p>

[Hey Nova.] Josh thought quietly when he saw me stir. I crawled out my sleeping bag and looked at the dirt under his feet.

[Hey Joshâ€¦] I mumbled.

[What's wrong?] Josh asked. [Please, you can tell me.]

[Iâ€¦] My eyes started tearing up again, and a wave of exhaustion washed over my body. [I don't know.]

[Come on.] Josh wrapped me up in a hug, and then laid back down on his sleeping bag. [I can see you hurting. Please?]

I took a deep breath, although I knew the gesture was meaningless since we were communicating telepathically. [Youâ€¦didn't include me.]

[Hmmm?] Josh questioned, clearly confused.

[â€¦Back when we introduced ourselves to Myst. You said that Static and Skarr were a part of your dream. You didn't say I wasâ€¦]

I felt a sob threaten to interrupt my thoughts, but forced it back down. I looked at Josh, expecting him to interrupt and say how he didn't say that exactly or how I had blown this out of proportion. I waited for him to say I was stupid or ridiculous, and how what I was feeling was dumb. Was it?

Josh sat quietly, listening. When he didn't say anything, I tried to swallow another sob and continued.

[When we battle, you always push Static to his best. You didn't do that with me. Iâ€¦I could have kept fighting, I could have won, I could haveâ€¦justâ€¦] The sob suddenly won, and I choked momentarily before continuing. [I could have. I want to be a part of your dream. I wantâ€¦I want to. So bad. I don't want to be just your friend, just your pet, just your mistake, just the Pokemon you didn't want to find there at the adoption house-]

[Novaâ€¦!!] Josh interrupted, shocked. I tried to continue, but my sobs prevented any kind of rational thought to transmit. He grabbed me in a tight hug, and held me as I cried. [Nova. Listen to me.]

[â€¦okayâ€¦]

[You are NOT a mistake.]

[â€¦]

[You are not just a pet to me. You are so much more than just a friend. Even if you never wanted to fight again, I would still want you by my side rather than ANY other Charmander.]

[â€¦]

[I'm really sorry for hurting your feelings. If you want to battle, and you want to be part of that dream, you have every right. Butâ€¦] He stopped suddenly.

[â€¦But!? But what Josh?] I begged, tugging on his shirt.

[I won't go easy on you.] Josh smiled down at me. I looked back up at him, and I was surprised that, for once, I wasn't crying. I smiled

back, with a small but growing amount of determination in my chest.

[I wouldn't expect you to.] I nodded fiercely.

[Ok. Next gym is grass. You have a natural advantage. Given your skill, I bet you could beat the Gym all by yourself. Are you up for the challenge?]

I gulped. Was I? Josh believed in me. And maybe, for once...I could start believing in myself too.

[Yeah. Yeah, I am!] I answered confidently.

[Alright. Get some sleep Nova, we got a big walk for tomorrow.]

I snuggled back into my sleeping bag, feeling relieved. Sleep felt like a welcome friend, and it wasn't long before I was all but absorbed into its embrace.

\* \* \*

><p>The sunlight brushed lightly against the cool canopy of leaves. The light grazed my sleeping eyes, and slowly, I snuggled out of my sleeping bag. Everyone still seemed to be asleep. Josh was safe from the coming light under the shade of a large tree, with Static curled by his side. Myst was resting on the forests floor, curled up tightly. She stirred slightly, and her azure, ocean eyes slowly slid open, and gazed questioningly at me.<p>

Wait, azure? Weren't her eyes red?

[Bwah!] A voice whispered loudly in my ear. I jumped forward startled, and whirled around to face the culprit. A black fox stood behind me, red eyes gleaming mischievously. [Got you!]

[Shhh, you're gonna wake Josh and Static!] I whispered.

[How do you know they're not already awake?] Myst grinned. [What if they're just my illusion, and they're already awake? What if everything is an illusion! OoOoOoOo!] Myst stood up on her hind legs and waved her arms in a spooky fashion.

I rolled my eyes. [Well, there's always one way to know.]

[Oh yeah? How?]

I lightly nudged Myst's shoulder, just enough to cause her to lose balance and fall on her back. With a disgruntled 'Oof!', a bushel of leaves in a nearby tree next to me vanished, revealed a certain yellow mouse ready to pounce from one of the branches. I grinned triumphantly.

[Darn it!] Static whined, [I almost had it! You couldn't keep it JUST one more second, Myst!?!]

[No.] She grumbled. Her eyes returned to me, looking playfully disgruntled. I couldn't help but laugh suddenly. Myst looked so ridiculous, all four legs flailing in the air, completely vulnerable. Her red paws clawed helplessly in the air, as if to grab some

imaginary tree branch to help her up. After a moment she stopped and grumbled into the air, then shot me an annoyed gaze. [Are you just going to gawk at me, or can you help me up?]

[You can't get off your back without help?] I stifled a snicker.

[Of COURSE I can.] With a dignified 'Hmph', Myst twisted herself on her paws, and shot me a cold glare.

[Oh, ok. Why didn't you do that sooner?]

[Just, uh, I didn't feel like it.] Myst stood up trying to look dignified. I squinted at her, judging her appearance. [Why do you care?]

[Because I think you're a liar.] I grinned, prodding the spot where Myst fell down, and heard a muffled yelp coming from the invisible Pokemon. The standing Myst disappeared into nothing, and the true Myst appeared once more, still on her back and flailing about.

[D-damnit!] She yelled in frustration, clawing angrily into the air. I offered her my paw, which she reluctantly grabbed and pulled herself onto her feet.

[That-] Static scoffed, climbing from down the tree, [-has got to be the FUNNIEST weakness I have ever seen! Seriously, just roll over or hop up, like this!] Static landed on his back, scrunched up, and sprang up quickly landing on his paws. Myst blushed angrily.

[Well some of us aren't accustomed to falling on our asses!] She hissed. [You've obviously got practice!]

[Excuse me!?!]

[Falling on your ass. You heard me. You couldn't stand alone in a battle if you tried.]

[Ohoho? Sounds like a challenge.] Static cracked his knuckles. [I'll just beat you like I did at the fair, or in the very least, just knock you on your back.]

Myst turned a scarlet shade of red as her paws dug angrily into the dirt. [You didn't win! Josh caught me before I could finish you off! One on one you would have been mine! With or without illusions!]

Sparks crackled around Static. [Hah, fighting words. Nova, wanna be the referee? Not that I'll need it of course...] He grinned.

[No, it will be pretty obvious when you're fainted, I should think.] Myst shot back. I gulped as the two opposing forces circled around me, waiting for the other to make the first move.

[So how do you get out of bed? Do you need help with that as well?] Static retorted in preparation for their battle.

[I don't know. How do you get to bed without Josh? Or can you only sleep when you're curled around him like a PET?] She mocked. Static's eyes went wide with anger, and I knew at once she had prodded a

sensitive spot. Static rushed forward, lunging at the black fox, with electricity flowing in waves around his body.

"Kah!" Static yelled, charging at Myst with a Fake Out. Myst made no attempt to dodge, and stood calmly in place. A moment before he collided into her, a green spherical bubble surrounded Myst, shielding herself from his attack. Static collided into it with his skull, and bounced off rather painfully into the grass.

[Running at me full speed. You must've put a lot of thought into that attack.] Myst scoffed.

[Shut it! At least I can get up! What are you, a turtle?!] Static sprang up, cheeks fueled with electricity. He was met with a black blast of power, smacking him across the side, sending him spiraling across the grass. Static panted, but raised himself to a half-standing pose. He looked tired, but his eyes shone with determination and endurance.

"Ch-Kah!" He screamed, sending lightning across the forest, enveloping Myst the yellow shockwaves. Myst gritted her teeth, but never tore her gaze from the offending yellow mouse.

Static and Myst both were panting at this point, but neither tore their gaze from the other. Both bristled, awaiting the other's move. I think Static was stronger, but Myst used strategy where Static relied on raw power. Static's cheeks crackled with jolts of electricity as he prepared his final attack. Myst's form shimmered, and she dashed behind me.

[W-what are you doing!?] I shouted at Myst. I turned to see the far too familiar clone of myself, looking back terrified. I shot her a confused glance, then turned back to Static, who was charging at me full speed. [Oh.]

Static smashed head first into me, sending me hurling into a nearby tree. My back smashed into the bark with a crack, and I slumped down the wood with a staggered expression. [Wrong Nova...] I mumbled, pained.

[You didn't disappear!] Static yelped at me, confused. He whirled around to see Myst in her true form standing on her two back paws. One of her front paws shone with black energy, which she promptly smashed into his snout. Static reeled back a few steps, before collapsing into the grass unconscious.

Myst panted over her fallen opponent. [...Hah! I did it!] She grinned at me though her exhausted breaths. [I beat Static!]

[Good job...] I mumbled, still reeling from Static's attack. [...but what are we going to tell Josh?]

Her grin melted slowly into a look of concern. [Do...do you think he would disapprove?] She panted, confused.

[Well, you did just knock Static unconscious...]

[Yeah, that was the point.]

[Well, I mean, I don't think we're supposed to do that to each

other...]

[How else can we understand our place? I challenged Static's standing in the group, and I won. Thus, I outrank Static.]

[I don't think that's how it works.] I mumbled, concerned.

[How was I supposed to react?] She demanded, turning to me angrily.

[I don't know!] I shrugged hastily. I heard the sound of twigs crunching behind me, and instantly cringed.

[Hey guys, keep it down, will you?] Josh chuckled, obviously awoken. [Some of us were trying to slee-] Josh's eyes went wide when he saw Static's body lying limp on the grass. [STATIC!?] He screamed. [What...what happened!?]

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh's POV)<p>

[Wow, and you won?] I asked, impressed.

[Yeah.] Myst finished recalling her tale. [It took some strategy and quick thinking, but yeah, I beat him.]

[Wow. Well, he's going to be livid when he wakes up.] I laughed. [I suppose we shouldn't leave for Celadon without him though, which means we need to walk back to the Center.] I thought grudgingly. [Plus Nova could probably use a healing too.]

[If you don't mind.] He responded politely. It was obvious he was quite damaged, though he could walk. I offered him stasis in his Pokeball, but he insisted he was fine.

We walked in silence for a few moments before Nova tapped my leg gently, trying to get my attention.

[Hey Josh?] Hey asked.

[Mmm?]

[How long did we walk last night, while I was...out?]

I thought for a moment. [Maybe...two or three hours? Celadon should be another four away I believe, from here. If we walk all day, we should be there around nightfall.]

[Ok.] He turned away, arms curled around his tail like a teddy bear.

[Why do you ask? Are you tired?] Myst questioned.

[Huh? No, I'm okay.]

[HmMMM.] Myst contemplated in response. Suddenly, a polite cough reverberated next to us. Were we not alone? I turned to the source of the sound to see a younger looking trainer walking alongside his Gloom.



"Oh! Hey there! Are those Pokemon yours?" He beamed, pointing at Myst and Nova. Myst looked bewildered by the boys' presence. I turned to Nova, who gave me a wide-eyed terrified stare. Why had none of us heard him before he chose to make himself known?

"Yeah, I've been a trainer for a while now." I smiled, hiding my bewilderment at his quiet approach. "What about yourself?"

"I've been a ranger for two months now! My oddish just evolved; I'm so happy! He's the first Pokemon I ever got!"

\_Ah, so that's how he was silent. He's a ranger.\_

"Nice." I spoke after a moment.

"Oh hey, wanna battle? It's what trainers do, right?"

I mentally slapped myself. Were any of my Pokemon in condition to battle? Static was flat-out unconscious, and Nova and Myst were both beaten up pretty badly. I had a few healing items in my pack though, and I was never one to turn down a fightâ€¦

This trainer seemed to be mostly grass; at least as first impressions go. I looked down at Nova.

"How about it, Nova? I can heal you before we start, if you want."

Nova gulped, but nodded. [Yes, and yes please.]

[I believe in you.] I laughed. A short battle shouldn't be too much for him at this stage, and should help with his confidence. I tossed him a potion, which he guzzled thankfully before handing back to me.

"Alright. Go, Nova!" Nova confidently strode in front of me, paws clenched ready for battle.

"Gloom!" The boy's cried, "Use Razor Leaf!"

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova's POV)<p>

[Dodge and use ember, Nova!] Josh commanded. I quickly dodged in between the whirling leaves and raced towards the Gloom, intending to make this a short a match as possible. A leaf clipped my leg as I ran, making me stumble. Another crashed into my shoulder, and soon a flurry of leaves crashed into me, obscuring my vision and slicing at my limbs.

[Nova! Get out of there!] Josh called out. Wincing, I dashed out of the leaves, receiving several small cuts as angry retaliation from the leaves. I took a quick breath, fueling myself with my meager fire. The Gloom stared at me from across our makeshift battlefield, eyes glazed over, and drool slowly seeping from its mouth. Fire blew through my mouth, and the foul smelling Pokemon was quickly engulfed in flames.

"Glah!" It cried, and reared up, preparing to fire another torrent of leaves. It hesitated for a moment, and refused to fire, eyes darting back and forth. Was the trainer communicating with it through a Pokespeak?

It didn't matter; the distraction was all I needed. I blew another small wave of fire at the purple plant, and it collapsed in the dirt.

[Yes!] I cried out, jumping in the air.

"Return Gloom." The younger trainer commanded, wielding a simple red and white Pokeball. Once the Gloom disappeared inside the ball, he reached on his belt and took out another.

'\_Ack...how many does he have?!\_' I thought with minor panic.

I tried to catch how many Pokeballs were on his belt, but his shirt was in the way. I gritted my teeth, determined to prove my worth.

[Careful Nova! Watch out for those dangerous grass types!] Myst taunted. My mind raced to come up with a clever comeback, but at the moment I came up blank. Too much of my energy was already expended preparing myself for my next opponent, and trying to stay confident.

"Go, Magnemite!" The trainer shouted, sending out a small hovering silver ball. A small eye opened on the spinning mechanism as it glanced upon me curiously.

[Nova, use ember!]

"Magnemite, use Spark!"

I sucked in a quick breath, and spat a small orb of fire at the strange Pokemon. Its magnetic arms swirled quickly with electricity, but my fire slammed against it before it could make a further attack. The Magnemite stopped spinning, and fell onto the earth with a heavy thud. I looked at it hesitantly—was it defeated?

"Return, Magnemite!"

\_Good, I think that's the last—\_

"Go, Metapod!"

\_Gosh darn it!\_

"Metapod, use tackle!"

[You know what to do, Nova.]

The small, non-menacing lump of green slowly hobbled towards me. It bounced awkwardly, trying to give me the most menacing look possible with its lopsided eyes. I took a deep breath, and felt the familiar warmth rise in my chest.

I wasn't sure if I hit, but either way the Metapod fell over and didn't get up. The trainer absorbed the Metapod back into the

Pokeball. I suppose that counts as a victory?

\_That's it right? Three? Please oh pleaseâ€|?\_

"Go, Swinub!"

[H-hey Josh?] I muttered weakly.

[Yeah Nova?]

[U-um, are you sure it's a good idea to keep me in? Water beats fire and all that, plus-]

[Oh, don't worry about it. Swinub is an ice type, you have the advantage.]

[â€|What? B-but isn't ice just frozen water?]

[Frozen water which fire melts. You got this!]

\_Gulp.\_

The Swinub materialized, but never opened its eyes. It almost appeared to be sleeping, as it never moved from the spot where it materialized. A small huff came from its snout, though it could have been just a snore.

[Light 'em up!] Josh beamed.

[Lightâ€|uh, what?] I asked confused.

[Use Ember.] Josh responded dryly.

[Oh, uh, right, right.] I coughed. ' Duh!' I mentally insulted myself while taking another deep breath. To my surprise, the Swinub did the same.

"Swyyy~" It hummed, sending a small, bluish cloud out of its snout. It encompassed me, sending chills down my normally warm body. I tried to breathe fire, but nothing came out. I shivered again, trying to find a way out of the frosty air.

[Left!] Josh ordered. Grimacing, I dashed to my left, relieved to find an opening in the icy mist. The fire in my chest rekindled, and I aimed appropriately at the small brown Pokemon.

"Chaaa!" I squeaked, as the fire shot out of my mouth. It swirled around the small pig, bashing him into his back in the small flurry of embers. The Swinub rolled over and took another deep breath, but I was quicker. I dashed forward, dousing it in another sea of embers. It didn't roll over that time.

I panted. No doubt there would be more, and I had to keep up my strength.

"That's a powerful Charmander you have." The trainer nodded at Josh.

[Yeah, he really puts his heart into it. He's a great addition to the team.] Josh smiled at me. For a moment, I forgot about my stress and

just basked in Josh's compliment.

\_I'm good on the team! He said it, he said it, he said it! Maybe I was wanted after allâ€|\_

"Why haven't you evolved him yet? He's clearly above the levelâ€|" The trainer questioned.

[Um, we haven't really talked about it yet-] Josh replied.

\_Talked about what?' \_It was frustrating only hearing half the conversationâ€|

[-but I'll get to it. By the way, why a mono-weak-to-fire team?] Josh finished, chuckling.

The trainer laughed guiltily. "I was actually trying to find a Geodude to train just for that reason, actually."

[Hah. Well, best of luck. Catch you later then!]

\_Wait, was the battle over?\_

"Bye!" The young boy scampered off into the woods, without a sound.

"Chaaaâ€|?" I mumbled unintentionally, looking questioningly at Josh.

[Hey, awesome job Nova! You did great!]

[T-thanks Josh! I tried really hard!] I smiled happily.

[Do you want a potion before we head off?]

[I can make it to the Pokemon Center. I'm okay.]

[Alright. Way to shine out there, man.]

\_His praise felt just as good as I hoped it would.\_

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

[Volcano Breath!]

[Taco's Fury!]

[JalapeÃ±o's revenge!]

[Flaming Belcher!]

[Guys, stooooop, you're embarrassing me!] The small Charmander by my leg whined, face beet red with embarrassment. Myst and I laughed. Our current nicknaming game came to a halt, and I rubbed his head apologetically. Nova was fairly sensitive, but I figured a small amount of teasing wouldn't hurt.

[Fiery Spittoon.] Myst concluded.

[Guyyyys!] Nova begged, tugging at my jeans.

[Alright, alright, we'll stop.] I laughed, rolling my eyes at Myst, signaling her to stop. She nodded, understanding my signal.

We arrived at the Pokemon Center. It was nearing noon, and the town was still mostly quiet with a few citizens bustling about, taking care of 'after festival' business. We walked into the Center, and a bright, cheery nurse greeted us all as we came in. I let out a sigh of relief; it wasn't the nurse from earlier.

"Hello, and welcome to the Vermillion Pokemon Center! How many I help you?"

"Hi! I have a few guys that are a bit wiped." I smiled.

"Well, lucky for you I'm a nurse." She laughed daintily. I placed Static's Pokeball on the table, and picked up and placed Myst and Nova and placed them on the counter. The nurse petted them appropriately for a moment, and reached down to get potions to heal them. After a moment, she handed them back to me, face beaming.

"There you go, all healed and happy. Have a great day."

"You too, thanks!" I smiled. What a nice nurse.

I walked out, satisfied with our little trip. I twirled Static's Pokeball in my hand, smirking to myself. [So, how mad is he gonna be, you think?]

[Pretty mad.] Charmander smiled sheepishly.

[Pissed.] Myst chuckled.

[We'll find out.] I laughed, tossing the Pokeball into the air. A familiar yellow rodent materialized onto the sidewalk, looking confused at his surroundings. He twirled around to look at me inquiringly before he saw the size of my grin. His eyes shot open as I saw the memories flood back into his mind.

This should be good.

## 8. Melodramatic Mount

(NOVA POV)

[I lost to a GIRL!?!] A telepathic shriek pierced Josh's mind.

[There's nothing wrong with us girls. We're good enough to beat you, apparently.] Myst's red eyes dug into Static's as she flicked her tail back and forth. [Though I suppose that's not saying too much, now is it?]

[Augh! Y-you caught me off guard is all!]

[That I did. How long were you out, by the way? Three, four

hours?]

[You cheated!]

[Did I? I believe we actually had a referee for that reason. Nova?]  
Myst purred, calling my name.

\_Gulpâ€|\_

[Nova,] Myst repeated. [Be a dear and remind me, who was our referee?]

[M-me.] I stammered.

[Ah. Then, who won our little duel?]

[I-I would rather not, um, get in the middle of-]

[See!] Static interjected. [He knew you cheated, the victory wasn't legit.]

[Static, she knocked you out cold. That's a pretty clear victory.]  
Josh admitted. Static swirled around to meet his trainers gaze.  
Static's usual confident arrogance was shattered, and replaced with wide, disbelieving turquoise eyes.

[Yâ€|you're siding with her?] Static squeaked, barely audible, even though telepathy.

[Yeah. She won, Static. You're awesome and you know that, but you need to learn to accept your losses too.]

Static slumped, miserable and utterly defeated.

[Hey, everyone loses a match every once in a while-]

[Two.] Static retorted sadly.

[Two?]

[Misty.]

[Hey, that wasn't your fault. I said that that was my planning-]

[If I was stronger I could have won.] Static thought sadly. He kicked a rock out of his path.

[You are strong. And together we'll get stronger. You did lose today, but that doesn't make you weak. That just means there's room for improvement.]

[â€|]

[Are you okay Stat?]

[Yeah, I'm okay.] Static muttered, sighing and straightening himself out. He sighed again, and redirected his thoughts at Myst.

[SryIwsasrlusr.] He muttered.

[I'm sorry?] Myst asked, genuinely confused by the mess of syllables.

[Sorry I was a sore loser.]

[Come again?]

[SORRY I was a sore loser!] Static admitted, extremely reluctantly, cheeks tinged with a frustrated red glow.

[That was mature of you, Static.] Josh smiled.

[Uh, yeah, thanks.] Static shrunk back, bravado still mildly shaken by his outburst.

[We're still going to make fun of you, though.] Myst reminded the annoyed Pikachu.

[Figured.]

[So what was the last thing you saw? I mean, after my paw hit your face?]

[Augh! this is going to be a long walk to Celadon!] Static rolled his eyes.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

[You also look adorable knocked out. You suck your paw in your sleep, did you know that?]

[I do not!]

[You also snore a bit. It's very endearing.]

[JOOOOSH.] A small, clearly annoyed Pikachu whined. [How long to Celadon!?!]

I smiled. [Whew, probably!] I looked up at the sun, and down at my watch. [Another five hours, maybe?]

[Can you at least tell Myst to cut out with the-] Static's voice trailed off as a large shadow sliced off the sunlight above our group. Suddenly we found ourselves enveloped in mild shadow, but just as soon as it was noticed, the phenomenon vanished.

[Bird?] Nova looked up at the sky inquisitively.

[Just any old bird? I suppose that's all I am anymore. I shouldn't even be considered a sentient being, should I? Being called any form of sentient life is too much of a compliment for me, hmmm Nova?]

I grinned harder than I had in months hearing that melodramatic dialogue. [Skarr!?!]

[Oh Josh, do not do me the discourtesy of pretending you actually missed me during my little time away. I know I am little more use to

you then a method of travel.] Skarr landed in front of me; his reflective, immaculate silver down preened to perfection. For once in a long time, he wore a small, rare smirk upon his face as he wrapped his wings around my waist.

[Skarr! AUGH, you have to tell us EVERYTHING!] I laughed, returning his embrace. [Go on, how's Karliah, how are the kids, how was the trip back?]

[In time, in time. For now, it appears I am doing several of our members a disservice.] Skarr turned Myst, bowing in a formal Skarmory bow. [My sincere apologies for not introducing myself sooner. I am Skarr, Josh's shield and wit.]

[So I see. You may address me as Myst.] Myst spoke formally. [I see at last a gentleman graces us with his appearance.]

[You are too kind, madam.] Skarr's orange eyes gleamed before turning to a timid Charmander, who stood on the outskirts of the path. [Ah, Nova! I'm afraid we were barely introduced. I don't mean insult of course, so let us start fresh, shall we? My name is Skarr; defense extraordinaire. Your kind have always been powerful, and to be respected. I shall treat you no differently, Walker Of The Stars.]

[T-thanks?] Nova looked nervously at the giant silver bird in front of him.

[Not at all, my friend.]

[Skarr!] Static yelped, jumping up and hugging the dark fowl. Skarr bent his neck to stare at the small Pikachu clinging off his down.

[Static! Ah yes, I had \_almost \_come to miss you during my time away.] Skarr smirked.

[Almost!?

[Well, you are and have always been a river to my rock.]

[A what?]

[Erosion, Static.]

[What?]

[Ah, um, a salt to my snail, if you will.] Skarr fumbled, trying to come up with a simpler metaphor.

[I'm still not seeing-]

[\*\*A CHEESEGRADER TO MY CHEESE\*\*.] Skarr abandoned all hopes of subtly as he momentarily stooped to Static's level to convey his point. [At any rate, your antics proved amusing, in the very least.]

[Be nice, Skarr.] I smiled.

[Be nice? Why Josh, I was! I even explained a metaphor that he could



understand. I'm being very understanding I would think. Plus, think about all the stress I've gone through. Raising seven kids, flying across two continents trying to find my trainer. I could nearly \_faint \_from effort.] Skarr's words dripped with sarcasm as he dramatically fell to the floor, crumpling his wing to convey his point. [Oh, woe is me! Simply flying back to an abusive trainer who does not comprehend my struggles! My quest has been in vain, everything I have striven for in my pathetic life has been for naught!]

We all were on the floor, tears falling from our eyes as we tossed and turned with laughter. Static stood over us, continuing his mock little play, smiling along with us, and enjoying the time once again spent with friends.

\* \* \*

><p>[WAIT. Wait, wait, wait.]<p>

[What?]

[Why on earth are we walking?] Static questioned angrily. I gave him a confused glance before realizing his point. We all turned to Skarr.

[FLY!?] Skarr yelled in astonishment. [Two continents, Josh, I have flown! One cannot fathom the fatigue deep in my bones; the weariness in my very\_ SOUL. \_It is truly a wonder I can even stand, let alone walk! You do be the disgrace, the \_ignominy \_of asking if I can fly you all to Celadon, simply to save you a small walk!? Is that all I am to you, a reusable method of travel?]

Long ago, these speeches would unnerve me beyond belief, and I would stumble all over myself apologizing and offering condolences for my actions. Now though, I know Skarr much better.

[Seriously?] I smirked, staring though his faÃ§ade.

[Absolutely not, my liege. Shall we be off?]

[Do you need a potion first, or an elixir?]

[After all this time, and you still believe my nonsense. No, I need no sustenance for flying! My kin are born for flying, and can go months without roosting.] Skarr grinned the grin I had missed for so long. [Now, my liege, shall we be off?]

\* \* \*

><p>[I missed this.]<p>

[Oh?]

[When you left, I really was scared you wouldn't be able to return...]

[You place so little faith in me, Josh.]

Wind rushed against my face, swirling though my thick orange hair. It was cold at this height, and the harsh winds didn't help matters, but

I didn't care. This was the top of the world! Flying miles above the Earth at breakneck speeds, clutching my Skarmory for dear life as we raced around the world. If I fell, I would truly have time to think about my death before I crashed against the ground.

Of course, Skarr would catch me in time. I admit, I have fallen more than onceâ€|

[I was just worried about you is all.]

[Worried I should fail?]

[Can't you just take the sentiment?]

[Never.] He grinned.

The lush forest sailed by, melding with the wind in a perfect shade of green. Details were lost as Skarr pushed himself at even faster speeds. Wind tore at my clothes and stung my eyes, and I laughed at our betrayal of nature. Every human should be given the gift of flight, but if only a select few could obtain it, I felt honored to be one of the chosen few.

[Hey Skarr?]

[Yes Josh?]

[You never got around to telling me about your kids!] Despite us communicating telepathically, I couldn't help yelling. The roar of the wind nearly deafened me, and almost all my other senses were also rendered mute.

[Oh, I'm sure you don't wish to bore yourself with such details.]

[Oh shut up and tell me!]

Skarr turned his neck and gave me a grin before returning his gaze at the clouds ahead. [Very well. Where shall I begin? We choose to name them different forms of metal. It's a bit clichÃ© of course, but Karliah insisted and I didn't argue. So, the first one to hatch - oh, I'm getting ahead of myself. Firstly, Karliah was slightly premature with our eggs. It happens, but rarely, and we were both moderately concerned. No trouble though, they hatched on time, a few hours later-]

[Hours!?!]

[Yes? Don't compare us strong sturdy Pokemon to you weak humans now, dragging out pregnancy for months and months.] Skarr laughed. [The first one to hatch was of course Bronze. Despite his name, he didn't share the same coloration as his mother, in fact, none of them did. I was a bit disappointed, but Karliah insisted it was for the best. Anyway, out of all of them, Bronze was always the most ambitiousâ€|]

Skarr went on, describing in detail the different personalities he was able to witness in each of his children. He talked about their first flight, hunt, and eventual parting. As Skarr described his last child to leave the nest, his usual casual melodramatic attitude

faltered as a teary demeanor began to set in.

[â€|never thought he would leave, you know? He wasn't the most agile, and it had been almost a day since the sixth - Silver - had left the nest. Tin was the first one born, of course, which meant he was the highest at risk for...difficulties. Usually not all in a kin make it, of course. But by sundown, he was off, flying over the ocean like it was second nature, right into the sunset, reflecting the hues of the setting star like he owned the skyâ€|]

[That's beautiful Skarr. Congratulations.]

[T-thank you Josh. For everything. And I don't just mean for Karliah-]

[I know, friend.]

Wind spilled from Skarr's wings as he safely made his decent to the forest's floor. He drifted to the grass below, landing softly along the dirt trail. As soon as I stepped off, he grabbed me back in a fierce hug, which I returned just as fiercely.

When he released me, I noticed the area under his eyes appeared more polished than normal. He quickly shielded his face from view with a wing, covering himself with the stretchy red tendons.

[Skarr?]

[Sorry, t-tearsâ€|don't suit my demeanor. Static would be relentless if he saw me in this state; give me a minute to compose myself, i-if you would. ]

[You don't need to be embarrassed in front of me, Skarr.]

[I know Joshâ€|] Skarr removed his wing, wiping his eyes clean. [Old habits, I suppose.]

[You made a good father, Skarr.]

[Perhaps I did.] Skarr sighed, content. [Well, we still have a bit of flying before we reach Celadon. Ready to ride?]

[Yes, yes. We should invest in a saddle for you, I swear your wings are slicing right though my legs-]

[A SADDLE!? Is that all I am to you, a simple flying horse?]

We laughed, as the sun reached its Zenith in the sky, and flew off towards Celadon.

\_â€|Bzzzzzzzâ€|\_

\_â€|Bzzzzzzzzzzâ€|\_

\_â€|Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzâ€|\_

'Who on earth is calling me?' I thought, flying high above the trail leading up to Celadon. This had been the third call I had received

after talking with Skarr. Normally I don't use my phone when flying because I could drop it, but considering this was the third time it buzzed in the last five minutes, I was wondering if it could be urgent.

After weighing the pros and cons with myself momentarily, I fished the phone out of my pocket, and pressed it to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Thank GOD, do you KNOW how hard it is to get a hold of you!? I've been calling for the past half hour-"

"Sâ€|andy?" I questioned.

"No, your other girlfriend. Which, by the way, you better not have."

"Hah, what's up?"

"Well, based on your texts it sounded like you were flying to Celadon."

"Yeah, I'm gonna-" I winced as the wind blew against my face, almost knocking the phone from my hand. Skarr gave me a sheepish shrug and slowed his speed. "Yeah, I'm gonna face Erika today, why?"

"Well, I flew down to see you-"

"That's awesome!"

"-thanks, but not why I called. It was gonna be a surprise anywayâ€|"

"Then what's up?" I asked, mildly concerned.

"Well, I got re-introduced to the law system down here in Celadon." Sandy groaned.

"What!? Are you in trouble?"

"My point is-"

A piercing screech violated my ears, causing me to wince in agony. I looked down to see a guard standing by the entrance of the city, glaring at me like a tiny ant, wielding a microphone.

"BY ORDER OF THE CELADON GUARD, WE ORDER YOU TO LAND!"

"-Damn it!" Sandy cursed. "J-just do what they say!"

"What!?" I asked bewildered.

"Fixing!" I heard a subtle click as she hung up.

[What shall I do, Josh?] Skarr asked with a hint of panic in his voice.

[Um, land like the guard said, I guess.] I gulped.

Skarr swooped down carefully, and landed on the dirt trail leading up to the city. Skarr regained his composure, walking briskly to the officer in question (with me still on his back) and staring though her with his sunlight, lava orange, piercing eyes.

[Do what do we owe the pleasure, my lady?] Skarr asked telepathically, with a hint of malice in his tone. The officer stood about my height, 5'11", and had a tightly curled brown bun of hair. She wore an official officer suit, a dark navy blue, and fashioned a tight, unpleasant frown that she wore with rather dull pink lipstick.

"It is my sworn duty to protect the citizens of this city, whether they're in the tunnels below, on the ground, or flying in the sky." The officer began, arms tucked behind her in a professional manner. "Flying without using the patented technique 'Fly' is risky and dangerous, and if it were my decision, it would be outlawed. The reason 'Fly' was created was due to the fact that there were so many accidents with young trainers being reckless and getting themselves seriously injured or worse. 'Fly', which is given at the Celadon mall for FREE mind you and takes only minutes to teach your Pokemon, gives the trainer a protective shield similar to 'Protect', which prevents trainers from flying off their mounts.

"However, this precarious and hazardous activity of flying without 'Fly' is legal as long as you are a trainer fit to handle such a task, as proven by your Rainbow badge, given by out gym leader Erika. Present your badge to me and you may leave inâ€¦" She gritted her teeth. "â€¦any way you see fit."

My mind raced as cold sweat dribbled down my neck.

You need a badge to fly? Are you kidding me? All this time it's been illegal? Oh shit, what am I going to tell the officer? I've never been arrested before! Oh shit, oh shit, oh shitâ€¦!

"Well? Do you have the badge or not, sir?" The officer gave me a stern look; her hand presented and awaiting the badge.

"Um, y-you see, officer, I don't have my badge-"

"Right now!" A girl behind me shouted. I turned my head to see a light skinned girl with pitch black hair rushing from the gym. She wore a pink bandana around her hair, and dressed in a yellow orange, almost oriental robe. "Sorry about that Josh, just got finished polishing your Rainbow badge. There you are."

I recognized the woman as Erika, the leader of the grass gym. What bewildered me was that although I knew her name from my research at school, she should not have known mine. She offered the Rainbow badge to me, which I stared at in trepidation. I hadn't earned this. It was against every policy ever set for a gym leader to hand an un-earned badge to an untested trainer.

Erika continued offering me the badge, and with no other foreseeable option, I hesitantly took the rainbow colored emblem from her palm. Satisfied, she turned to the officer.

"Is there a problem ma'am?" Erika asked kindly.

"Evidently not." The police woman nodded curtly to Erika. She turned to me. "Sorry for the lecture, I just-" She turned away for a moment before returning her gaze to me. It looked far less professional then before, more like a disappointed mother. "â€|my brother was injured in a flying accident, flying bareback like you were. I don't want further injuries to result fromâ€|this. I can't stop you from not using 'Fly', but I ask as a citizen that you consider using safer methods. And if you do still ride bareback, justâ€|please fly low."

The officer bowed her head, obviously still grieving for her brother. Perhaps I had been a bit reckless. I made a mental note to check out 'Fly' before I left Celadon, but for now, I had other questions that needed addressing. The police officer walked back to her post, mind filled with presumably thoughts about her injured brother. Erika turned back to me, and motioned towards the gym.

"Give me that."

The perfume inside the gym was pleasant, but almost overpowering. The scent made my head buzz, as if a tiny insect had gotten wedged inside my ear.

Once inside, Erika's kind, carefree façade shattered, and she gave me a disapproving stare. "You shouldn't have accepted that badge; you knew you didn't earn it."

"I was thinking the same thing! Why did you offer it to me? How do you know my name?" I yelped.

"Because apparently, someone has a better sense of caring for you then you do."

"Huh?"

A brown figure jumped up in the distance of the gym. I looked around Erika to see Sandy standing behind her, smiling triumphantly.

"Hey, I told you I would fix it." Sandy grinned victoriously, smashing me in a tight hug. I returned the embrace, but was still confused as ever.

"W-wait, what happened?"

"Your girlfriend over hereâ€|" Erika spoke drily, "â€|'convinced' me to help you out with the police. If it was \_anyone else\_ I would have never done that, butâ€|well, be happy for your girl over here. Plus, she promised me you could earn the badge legit afterword."

[How did you convince-] I started, thinking privately to Sandy.

[Be thankful now, story later!] Sandy quipped. "He can win, I know it." She spoke confidently.

"Then the only thing that remains is testing that theory." Erika twirled a normal pokeball between her middle and index finger. "Are you ready, fireball?"

\_Hair joke, thanks.\_

"Mind if I talk to my Pokemon first? It will only take a moment." I asked.

"â€|sure, but make it quick."

"Thank you." I reached down and took the three of the four pokeballs that hung at my waist, and released them. They wouldn't all fight of course, but they would all be cheering on the timid Charmander that would win us the Rainbow badge legitimately.

I still had questions, specifically aimed at Sandy, but those could wait. For now, the lights were set, the stage was ready, and little stood in the way of my next badge.

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

[I believe in you, Nova. You know that.]

[Me too!]

[We believe in you Nova!]

[Do not fret; I am confident in your abilities.]

[T-thanks everyone.]

Paws shaking with trepidation, I turned towards the arena. The gym almost looked overgrown, with floor tiles exchanged for grass, and florescent moss as natural lighting on the ceiling. Exotic flowers and plants surrounded the battlefield, some giving off odd colored lights, and others simply looking appealing. The battlefield appeared to be bathed in an otherworldly glow.

I couldn't fail. This time more than most, because I promised Josh he could push me as hard as he pushes the others. I was weaker than them, which meant I had to work harder to prove myself.

I looked at Erika, the gym leader. She looked prepared, assured, and ready. None of the emotions I felt. Josh had faith in me, but I had none in myself. He expected me to win, which made the situation all the worse. If he expected it to be a difficult battle and I lost, it would be understandable. If he expected me to win and I lostâ€|

\_I can't lose. J-just focus on hitting them, and staying conscious.\_

"Ready?" Erika called out. Josh stood up, and faced her confidently.

"Absolutely."

"Then let's not waste any more time. Go, Ivysaur!"

"Nova, use Ember!"

"Ivysaur, Stun Spore!"

A green tank like Pokemon appeared, and growled menacingly. It looked like a bigger Bulbasaur, with the bulb on its back half open, revealing a pink flower underneath. It wielded dull but powerful looking fangs and bright red eyes. After a moment of hesitation it charged forward with a yellow mist trailing off the flower on its back.

[Dodging its next attack is more important than hitting it with yours Nova! Be careful.] Josh forewarned. I took a deep breathe, feigned a dash left, and ran to the right. The Ivysaur realized my bluff to late, and stumbled on its side in an overcorrection of its own path. It jumped back up, but the few seconds it was on its side was enough for me to fire an ember.

[Grrah!] The Ivysaur roared, eyes squinted in fury. The billowing cloud surrounding its flower now turned from amber to a dark, foreboding purple. This time Ivysaur would expect a feint, and without another command from Josh, my mind was blank.

The Ivysaur charged. I took a deep breath.

Purple clouds exploded around me, enveloping the arena in a heavy dust. Coughing through the spores, I vaguely saw Ivysaur polluting the air with the flower on its back. With one last cough, I shot my minor flames at the heavy plant, and it collapsed in its sea of lavender ash.

\_Whew! One down!\_

All the sudden, my vision blurred and I convulsed. My stomach turned and the room around me twisted and disoriented itself with different shades and hues. I felt sickening, and I nearly fell from dizziness.

[Woaaah! Josh, what was that!?] I yelped, once the feelings subsided.

[You've been poisoned. Relax.]

I squeaked, then just quietly shook in place. What was Josh's plan? How serious was the poison? I turned and gave him a concerned look, but he just nodded quietly in reply. I turned back. What would happen to me? Did the poison make me weaker, or make me less likely to win, or-

Another spell hit me, seemingly turning the floor to goo. I collapsed on the floor nauseated, trapped by the sticky pull of the green slime. I tasted the slime as it slowly engulfed me, gluing my limbs to the floor and slowly seeping its way into my mouth.

Suddenly it was over. The grass resumed its normal texture, and the ground was its typical form. I pushed myself off the ground, and looked wildly around to ensure if anyone else saw what just occurred.

[JOSH! JOSH! D-did you see the ground!? It went up, and, and, was all gooeey and trapped me and-]

[RELAX. That's an order. The poison only works when you're active. Stand still and don't move. Barely breathe, barely think. When she



sends out her next Pokemon, only expend energy to dodge and attack.]

[O-okay.] I sniveled. [Jâ€|Josh?]

[Yes?]

[Iâ€|I'm scared.] I barely whispered, paws clenched in front of myself.

[What you're seeing isn't real, and it can't hurt you. The poison, however, can. The more often it affects you, the more damage it deals.]

[O-okay.] I gulped.

[And Nova?]

[Y-yes?]

[I believe in you.] Josh responded. [You can do this.]

Erika reached down and pulled a second pokeball out of her pockets with a satisfied smirk. She knew I was weaker nowâ€|

"Go, Vileplume!"

"Viile!" The female Vileplume hissed from across the stage. Her red peddles bobbed up and down as she bounced in place in preparation for battle.

[Nova, use Ember!]

"Vileplume, use Venoshock!"

Vileplume and I both waited for the other to make a move. It occurred to me that I had no idea how 'Venoshock' even worked, and that my ignorance would make the attack harder to avoid. I took a deep breath.

"Vahaaaa!" She screamed as the embers burned against her skin. She recovered quickly, springing up in a sea of pedals, and gave me an icy stare. Her eyes changed from a dull red to an malicious black as her eyes never left my body.

I tried taking another deep breath, but suddenly it felt as if the stale air in my lungs was trapped inside. I couldn't breathe. I clutched my throat in desperation, noticing in horror that my normally invisible orange veins had turned to a sickening shade of black. Looking down at myself, I saw all of the veins in my body as if they were highlighted in black, all leading up to my heart, which was encased with the foul fluid.

My body pulsed violently, sending me to my knees. The room began once again to spin, creating a vortex of colors that I knew didn't exist here. Despite my lack of oxygen and my mind's hallucinogenic state, I noticed the Vileplume's stare never leaving my body.

[Let the poison consume you.] She ordered, growling with malevolence.

Despite the warm atmosphere of the gym, I shivered. My body felt weak, and my mind was growing fuzzy because of the lack of air. I couldn't attack without my embers, and this poison made me weak

I focused my energy, and coughed as hard as I could. A vile black blob fell out of my mouth, and a rush of warm, energizing air once again filled my lungs. After gulping a few more mouthfuls of air, I stood to face my opposition.

"Char!" I shouted, breaking the silence of the room and once again showering the Vileplume in a wave of fire. The attack knocked her on her back, and her eyes resumed their normal reddish color before they closed.

"Châ|.châ|chhâ|" I gasped. My fur resumed its normal orange color, though I could still feel the toxins pulsing through my veins.

[Nova, you've done extremely well. Return, and let's get that poison looked at] Josh spoke with a hint of concern in his voice.

[...don't need to be babied] I stubbornly replied. [I want to be treated like the others]

[I am, Nova. You don't need to faint; I wouldn't push anyone that hard. You don't have to-]

[You expected me to win by myself. I have to] I panted.

[...Nova, I didn't mean-]

[Please, Josh.]

"Are you ready?" Erika grinned, holding her last Pokeball. "Go, Ludicolo!"

"WOAH! That's not in the league regulations! What are you doing?" Josh yelled.

"Yeah, well I also wasn't supposed to get you out of that ticket, hmmm? I guess I'm just full of surprises today. Prove your salt, trainer."

[It's not about proving my salt, it's about helping Nova gain confidence by facing foes he can win against.] Josh thought violently, loud enough for me to hear. [Not by trying his hardest and still failing against an impossible foe!]

"Ludah! Ludah!" The Ludicolo bounced energetically. I walked to the middle of the stage, faltered, then regained my footing and continued.

[Nova] Josh murmured. [What are you hoping to prove?]

[\_That I'm not afraid anymore.\_] A voice rose from my thoughts with a volume I didn't recognize.

[Fainting won't prove anything to me!]

[\_I don't intend to faint.\_]

[Nova-]

For once, his words were lost on me. My insecurities and faults washed off me like water, and all I saw before me was my foe, my prey. I no longer felt the effects of the poison under my flesh, nor the wounds from my previous battles. A circle of white fire surrounded me, engulfing me in a warm, lightened glow.

A feeling came with this power. A feeling I had never felt beforeâ€|bubbled up inside of me. It was nice. It was the opposite of my inexperience, my fear, my anxietyâ€|

...Was this what confidence felt like?

Red and blue fire mixed with the white, giving me an almost supernatural appearance. Both Josh and Erika held bewildered expressions, though to me their feelings were irrelevant. All that mattered was me and my prey.

[\*\*\_Be warned, child of the seas and grassâ€|\_\*\*] I spoke in an ancient tongue, [\*\*\_For you have now kindled the wrath of the dragonsâ€|\_\*\*]

## 9. A reflective reunion

(Nova POV)

An explosion of scarlet and azure energy erupted out of my core, lighting the stage with supernatural flames. My prey quivered in the corner, terrified yet oblivious. Dual claws formed at the base of my paws, glistening with the same red blue fire as my aura itself. I strolled closer to my victim, carefully eyeing any ways in which he may escape.

"Lud!" He yelped, dodging to the left. With unnatural speed I met his path and smashed him across the side with my claws. He flew backwards and bounced off the mossy gym wall, and I caught him again with an uppercut, slicing through his hit points like butter. Another light kick sent him spinning across the floor, eyes closed in an admission of defeat.

Just as quickly as had appeared, the red and blue flames vanished off my body. My pseudo claws disappeared, and my previous confidence and power were replaced by a heavy fatigue. I fell on my knees, overcome with exhaustion.

After a moment to regain my composure, I stood up and faced Josh, expecting a look of happiness or pride. Instead, I received shocked and troubled faces staring back.

Static was the first to break the silence.

[Thatâ€|wasâ€|AWESOME!] Static cheered, racing across the stage and gripping me in a fierce hug. [Dude that wats SO epic, oh my GAWD! Did you see yourself!?] He yelped, showering me with pride.

[That was amazing Nova.] Myst commented, shaken but impressed with my

display.

[So cool!] Sandy cheered.

[Quite astounding.] Skarr commented. [I do not know the name of that-]

[Outrage.] Josh commented slowly. Everyone turned to him, gauging his reaction. How would he react to a somewhat disobedient attack, despite it succeeding? Suddenly I felt a pit form at the base of my stomach. Would he be mad? Would he see this defiance as failure, or worse? I have never seen Static, or Skarr, or anyone else go against his ordersâ€¦would he hate me?

[â€¦That wasâ€¦] Josh reflected for a moment. [â€¦damn cool.]

I ran forward and hugged his pant leg as hard as I could. I was so happy, happier than I had ever been before. For once, I had succeeded! Josh wasn't mad, he was proud, and not just that, he was impressed! Impressed by\*\*\_me\_\*\*! I did something, something not even Josh thought I could do! I squealed with happiness, then I quickly felt nauseous and fell on the floor.

[Oops, first things first. Here Nova, this should help.] Josh handed me a heart shaped berry. [This should cure the poison. Eat that while I fetch a potionâ€¦] Josh continued, rummaging through his bag.

The berry tasted sweet, almost like a peach, but also with a hint of bitterness. I wasn't sure how much of the berry actually got in my mouth, considering it nearly exploded with juice as I bit into it. The front of my coat was smothered with the tangy juice, along with most of my snout and face. I grinned sheepishly.

Josh turned back to me potion in hand, then eyed me up and down, laughing approvingly. [Nicely done.]

"Char!" I yelped excitedly, if a bit embarrassed, and happily accepted the potion.

"If you are done." A colder voice echoed from across the room. I turned to see Erika, with a quiet, accepting smirk on her face. "Well done, Fireball. I guess your girlfriend knew what she was doing." Erika commented, tossing a sparkly looking piece of metal at Josh.

"Thank you." Josh responded, more as a courtesy than an actual gesture. He turned to Sandy. "By the way, you never told me-

"Later!" She grinned, pulling on Josh's sleeve. "Don't we have one more gym to face today? We're losing daylight, come on!"

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh's POV)<p>

[Alright, I've let you drag me this far without-]

[Technically, we're flying.]

[Technically, you're deflecting.]

I gave Sandy a concerned look. The usually confident smile she wore was replaced with a sheepish smirk as we flew across the skies. We both flew in protective blue spheres, me being supported by Skarr, and Sandy being supported by Charizard.

A thought crossed my mind.

[Hey Sandy, where do you work?]

[I , um, I don't work.]

[Yes you do, you've mentioned your job before.]

[I got fired.] She lied.

[Sandy.] I thought sternly.

[Yes, my dear?]

[Stop it.]

[Stop what?]

[It.] I glared. Sandy smirked, and gave me a coy, suggestive gaze.  
[Come on, tell me! What are you hiding!?]

[I'll tell you later.]

[Sandy!]

[Yes, my dear?]

[Tell me now!] I whined, slightly shocking myself about how childish I sounded.

[I can't tell you now.]

[Why!?]

[Because it's a surprise.]

[Why is it a surprise?]

[I can't tell you that; it'll ruin the surprise.]

"AAAAUUUGHHH!" I growled into Skarr, as he chuckled at our ridiculous conversation.

[Can I have a hint?] I pleaded. Sandy pondered this for a moment, staring into the sky.

[â€|No.] She concluded. My body fell limp upon Skarr, as all movement ceased in my limbs.

[Josh!?] Sandy yelped. [Are you alright!?]

[No.]

[What happened!?!]

[I died. You frustrated me to death.] I body bounced lightly on Skarr as we flew. [You killed me; it's all your fault.]

[It's my fault, is it?]

[Yup. Killed your boyfriend in cold blood. You're evil. You're a criminal, and you're gonna go to jail.]

[Like they'll catch me.]

[Oh?]

[I'll hide your body, and they'll never find out that I killed you.]

[Yeah, well they have satellites, and they're watching you right now, and they know you killed me.]

[Well, I'll have to invade the satellite place and hack the-]

[You are both have the attention span, and mindset of hatchlings.] Skarr interrupted, scoffing at our rather juvenile conversation.

[Oh hush, I'm sure you had silly conversations with Karliah.] I replied.

[Never. Most of our conversations involved hypotheticals, with some philosophy and other intellectual discussion.]

[Aren't you a bundle of laughs.] Sandy responded dryly.

[My apologies, shall I try again?] Skarr smirked. [OH JOSSSHâ€¦ ~] He crooned, in a hideously high voice. [DON'T DIEEE ON MEEE ~, HERE, LET ME GIVE YOU MOUTH TO MOUTH, I'M SURE THAT WILL REVIVE YOU, JOSH-CHAN!]

I howled with laughter, grabbing Skarr's sides to ensure I wouldn't fall off. Sandy blushed with outrage, glaring at Skarr, then me for laughing.

[We WERE having a moment.] Sandy grumbled.

[Exactly, my dear.] Skarr spoke nobly, resuming his normal tone and gaining some altitude. [You were distracting my trainer from what should be his goal at this current time â€" focusing on different strategies against the next gym.]

[And I'm not allowed to have any fun?] I grinned at Skarr.

[None at all, I'm afraid.] He grinned in reply. [In all honesty, you COULD just use private-chat, instead of painfully forcing me to hear every sap-dripped word coming out of your combined consciences.]

[You could always just turn your Pokespeak offâ€¦] I muttered.

[Oh!? Could I now?!] Skarr asked sarcastically, a giant, evil grin appearing on his face. [I think I'll do just that.]

Suddenly, Skarr took a nosedive. I realized too late that in fact he couldn't turn off the Pokespeak because the switch itself is manual, and that would require his wing to adjust it on his scalp!

[One moment, I have almost obtained itâ€¦] Skarr cackled madly as we plummeted towards the earth, one wing mockingly brushing against his head, prodding at the Pokespeak.

[SKAAAARRRRRRRRRR!?!] I screamed as the ground expanded and filled my vision with pictures of my eminent death.

[Oh? Would you rather I keep it on?] He asked satirically.

[YES PLEASE!] I yelped.

[Well, if you insist.] He lazily pulled out of the nosedive, nearly brushing his metallic underbelly on the grass trail below. [Why the change of mind, Master?]

[B-b-because I didn't want t-to have to clean you later.] I stuttered, still shaken even though Skarr had resumed his normal flight.

[Clean me?]

[Yeah, after I PISSED MYSELF IN FEAR all over you! Remember whom is sitting on whom, hmmm?]

Skarr snorted with a laugh.

[Hey, if you could NOT kill my boyfriend, that would be swell.] Sandy thought-yelled down to us.

[Oh, right, like I would kill him. Then what? Would I hack the "satellite place" to cover my tracks?] Skarr grinned.

We all laughed as Skarr flapped to gain more altitude.

[Hey. You never did answer me, Mrs. Avoidance.] I once again reminded Sandy.

[Tell you what. You beat Misty, and I promise, before we go to sleep I'll show you the surprise.]

[Show? So it's tangible?]

[Duh? It wouldn't be a good gift if it wasn't tangible, would it?]

[Well, I was just wondering what it could be-]

[What kind of gift isn't tangibleâ€¦?]

[JOSH-CHAN, DESU DESU~, HOLD ME TIIIGHHTERRR~] Skarr cackled, both guessing what 'non-tangible' gift ideas were floating in the recesses of my mind and successfully humiliating me.

[Augh, you boys are all the same!] Sandy hissed in annoyance.

[W-what else would be a non-tangible gift?] I whimpered sheepishly.

[No JOSH, your gift is TANGABLE.] She said, rolling her eyes.  
[Perv.]

[Oh, you think of a non-tangible gift that isn't that!]

[Friendship. Love. Happiness. Adventure.] She listed, giving me a dark smirk.

[Those aren't GIFTS!]

[Happiness isn't a gift?]

[Now THIS is a good conversation!] Skarr piped up at the sound of a more philosophical conversation.

[Shut up Skarr, or I'll sock you in your non-tangibles.] Sandy chuckled.

\* \* \*

><p>[Are you sure you still remember how?]<p>

[Oh Josh, how you taunt me!]

My emotional Skarmory smirked at my concerns of his lack of training. The gym in which we were was just as I remembered it - clean, filled with elaborate statues, and maybe a hint of too much chlorine. Misty sat at the far end, twirling a water-drop shaped badge, and waiting patiently. Static, Nova, Myst, Wiggly, and Sandy all were present, waiting in anticipation for what would likely be a promising battle.

"Will you face me with that Pikachu then? My Lanturn has been looking forward to a back-to-back victory on that tiny mouse."

"That is not a piece of information I am not willing to divulge at this point in time." I smirked, realizing I sounded a bit like Skarr. "However, if you are ready, I would be willing to show you."

"Took you long enough, trainer." Misty stood up, pocketing the small badge, and grabbing a Pokeball in its place. "Go, Lanturn!"

"Go, Skarr!" I beamed, pointing my finger dramatically at the ceiling of the gym.

\* \* \*

><p>(Skarr POV)<p>

On command, I took to the ceiling of the gym with just a few small flaps of my large, reflective wings. I shouted in my native tongue, sending reverberations though the gym, and definitely unnerving the Lanturn as it stared up at me in wonder and fear.

"A flying type, really?" Misty mocked. "You should go back to school



and learn the basics trainer. Unless of course you like your birds \_well done\_." She cackled. "Lanturn, use thunderbolt!"

[Skar, use-]

[I'm not that out of practice, Josh. Standard defensive set?]

[You know all too well.]

I enjoyed a brief pause before I dove at the Lanturn. The Lanturn instantly dived under the water, but I was faster. Just as I flew overhead, I was able to lightly graze his back with a reflective feather, opening a small reddish purple gash.

"Turn!" The Lanturn yelped in reply, bulbs lighting up fiercely with electricity. A bolt struck my wing, sending a charged pulse through my metallic coating. I swirled back, and landed safely on the pool's ledge in a flurry of metallic feathers.

"TURN!" He screeched again, sending another bolt of electric power surging through my frame. I gazed silently with mocking intensity in his sad attempts to overpower me in battle.

"Râ€|Reeern!" The lantern shook again, sending another powerful shock through my core. It looked exhausted though the effort.

[How are you doing, Skarr?]

[As well as you want me to be. Taking hits like always. Hurting, suffering for your victory.]

[Seriously.]

[Excellent. Would you expect anything less from your defense extraordinaire?]

[Absolutely not.] Josh smirked.

Another flurry of feathers surrounded me as I continued using Roost. The damage dealt to me continued to melt off faster than Lanturn could accumulate it, and soon I was bordering full health.

I continued my mocking smile at the Lanturn, knowing it couldn't harm me. It growled and continued shocking me, but with my now pure steel typing it felt like little more than a pleasant buzz.

"Laaaaan!" The Lanturn whined, trying to electrocute me again but failing due to lack of energy.

"So what, is this your game? Keep healing until I get so bored I'm forced to forfeit?" Misty scoffed.

"Or until your Lanturn faints from poison, yeah." Josh grinned.

Misty's eyes shot open as she looked at her Lanturn, now glowing a slight shade of purple.

"Damn it!" She cursed, eyes darting back and forth as she tried to formulate a plan. "L-Lanturn, use Ice Beam!"

[Pretend that will do something to me, hmmm Josh?] I mocked.

[Haha, indeed.]

The Ice beam clashed harmlessly against my smooth silver completion. The Lanturn charged up another thunderbolt as well, but cringed as another dose of toxins enveloped its being. Feathers swirled around me, but as of now they were more of a formality.

In a final uneventful conclusion, the Lanturn shot one final burst of electricity, then stopped moving and simply floated on top of the light blue pool of the Cerulean Gym.

[What a difficult battle!] I jested towards Josh, [Truly you place me at my limits.]

[Don't get too cocky now, it's only uphill from here.]

[Luckily for me, I have wings.]

Josh gave me a quiet smirk as he waited for Misty to select her next Pokemon.

"Go, Tentacruel!" Misty shouted, throwing a red and white sphere into the air.

[Joshâ€|?] I questioned, now unnerved. I had no moves to damage a poison typeâ€|

[On it. We wouldn't want you to have ALL THE FUN, now would we? It would be rude of our other companions~] He hummed.

[Absolutely.] I agreed. [I can think of a certain annoying little mouse that would love a water opponentâ€|]

[My thoughts precisely. Return, Skarr, and go get 'em, Stat!]

\* \* \*

><p>(Static POV)<p>

"CH-KAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

This was it. Me or them, and I had to make sure it wasn't me. Every muscle was tensed, every cell in my being was poised at attention. I didn't lose. I didn't fall, and I never fainted. This was my redemption, my call back into the realm of battle and success.

[Static-] Josh called out, preparing his instructions for battle. I glared at my opponent, and listened intently.

[-Standard set electric.]

\_My favorite.\_

"CHAAA!" I shouted, dashing across the tiles to the pool and leaping at the Tentacruel. My paws smashed together in front of the Tentacruel causing the large mass to flinch back suddenly, disturbing

the water in the pool. I used my momentum to bounce off one of the Tentacruel's red pustules, and flew into the air, sending a wave of electricity smashing into my foe. A deep rumbling sound echoed through the gym.

[\*\*You think you can best me, cretin? We are the TITANS of the sea!\*\*] A dark, baritone voice reverberated through my mind. A tentacle broke through the waves and recoiled like a whip, then lashed out and struck me in midair.

I spun and landed on the opposite wall, glaring down my opponent. The waters in the pool had now become a fierce, dark lavender, and the once calm pool was thrown into chaos as waves and whirlpools threatened anyone who got too close.

I sprinted towards the pool one more, and leapt towards the kraken. A long, slimy tentacle broke through the waves and caught me in midair, and drug me under the water. It began constricting me, rending what little oxygen I had to begin with, and dragging me closer to the terrifying, gaping maw of the Tentacruel.

\*\*[Accept your defeat with honor, for you were never a match for me!]\*\* The deep, commanding voice shook my mind.

[Dude, I'm pretty sure I've already won.] I grinned, even though no one could see. I bit down on the tentacle restricting me, and sent the strongest jolt of electricity at the monster I could.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

\_That's the Static I know!\_

The Tentacruel convulsed with the electrical surge before bobbed on the waves, floating off on the mild current it had created.

[Static!] I called out, concerned that he hadn't surfaced yet. It was possible that he was still tangled underwater, in which case he may have passed out. I took a step back and prepared to dive in the pool. Pokemon venom was lethal to humans if it got in an open wound, and by the dark purple waves I knew that it was still potent, but if Static stayed fainted underwater he could die. I took a deep breath and prepared myself.

\_I'm healthy. I should be able to last at least an hour before the toxins do irreversible damage, which means about forty minutes of time conscious. I rescue Static " that would take about three minutes, in which time I also become infected " then Misty and the like take me to the hospital, which is only twenty minutes away. I'll survive.\_

Despite my thought process, I was already running to the pool. Thankfully, Static's head broke through the waves, and I stopped myself. He sucked in a mouthful of air, and waved from the pool.

I panted, terrified about what I almost did, and thankful that Static didn't need saving.

[Nice job, Static!]

[You know it!] He grinned. [Who's next?]

\* \* \*

><p>[You would have DIED.]<p>

[Naw, I would have lived.]

[With massive brain damage, maybe.]

I grinned. [So no difference?]

Sandy rolled her eyes, and gave me an annoyed yet amused smirk. [Be careful, will you?]

[Always.] I lied.

Static stood loyally by my side, along with Nova, Skar, and Myst. Sandy stood to my left, petting her larger-than-average Wigglytuff as we talked. Misty walked towards us, taking her time as she meandered around the gym.

"Have we earned the badge?" I questioned, smiling.

"It was never a question of whether you earned the badge; from the first time we fought you met the prerequisites. You fought me again for a different reason." Misty responded.

"Oh?"

"You wanted to earn my respect."

"And?"

"You demonstrated strategy in battle, trust in your Pok  mon, and the willingness to sacrifice yourself for the sake of your team. You have earned my respect." Misty concluded, tossing a light blue badge in my direction. I caught it, and briefly admired it in my palm. "Now get out of here before you poison yourself." She concluded, grinning.

We bid her farewell, and walked out of the humid, warm chlorinated building. Sandy stood by my side, and our Pok  mon all trailed at our heels. A light breeze tugged at my jacket and the grass beneath our feet as the sun set on another wondrous Kanto day. The sky began its transformation from blue to black, and the moon was already present in the cloudless sky.

"Want to head back to the Center, get a room?" Sandy asked, turning to me.

"On a beautiful night like tonight?"

"Eh, there will be other pretty nights; ones where comfortable beds won't be so close by."

"Do you have a problem roughing it?"

Sandy's eyes sparked with the accusation.

"You think I would have a problem with sleeping outdoors?" She asked, with a hint of venom in her words.

"Well, I know you're not as accustomed with the wilderness as I am." I lightly taunted. Her gaze turned from one of anger to one of inquisition, almost as if we were playing a game with an unclear, dark purpose. When she didn't speak up immediately, I added, "Since I am a trainer. A few badges under my belt, and I know I can handle any wild Pok  mon that could come up."

"And I couldn't?"

"I didn't say that."

"It was implied."

I shrugged. "Well, some are powerful, and I know you aren't as strong as-

"Strong as?"

"  Never mind."

"No." She smirked, jabbing an accusing finger into my chest. "Say it."

"I know you aren't as strong as me, from a battle perspective." I mumbled.

"Just because I have weaker Pok  mon, right?" Her eyes shone suddenly, and I had the feeling of walking into a trap, with the iron fangs looming over me. Still, I felt a strong urge to defend myself. I had beaten her  twice  one time so much so her main Pok  mon ended up in the hospital with a concussion. I should answer her honestly. If our Pok  mon were on even level, do I think I still would have won?

"I believe I still would  because I have spent more time training, and because I have more experience." I stated shakily. Sandy ran ahead of me, with an unnerving grin.

"So if we were ever to battle, somehow, on even terms  I wouldn't stand a chance?"

"I-I didn't say that." I mumbled awkwardly.

"Would you wager on it?"

"Depends on the wager...?"

"Dinner and a movie. Loser has to pay."

Those were terms I could agree on.

"Okay  " I smiled cautiously. "If the situation should arise, where somehow we both have similarly leveled Pok  mon with the same amount of training, yes, I would accept your wager."

"Excellent." Sandy grinned, entwining her fingers together like an

evil mastermind. "By the way, nice fighting. Facing and beating two gyms in one day is almost unheard of."

"I had awesome help." I smiled.

"Still though, you must be a bit fatigued, and your Pokémon as well. Perhaps a vacation is in order?"

I heard the slow, rusty sound of a mechanical trap jaw shutting closed.

"Vacation?" I asked, meekly.

"I just so happen to have tickets, you see!" Sandy fished out a ticket out of her pocket that was terribly crinkled. "Go to the Sinnoh Battle Park. Me plus one, naturally. Seeing your impressive victory, I was wondering if you would accompany me." She smirked.

No words came out of my mouth as I stared at her in questionable concern. One did not simply 'Acquire Sinnoh Battle Park' tickets, as they were reserved for only the best of the best of trainers. Beating the elite four was simply a pre-requisite for obtaining a ticket. Spectators of the park paid thousands just to get a nose bleed seat to watch the champions of the world duke it out on a grand, giant stage. This was the opportunity of a lifetime, but a burning question still remained.

"How on EARTH did you get that?!" I blurted.

"Oh this?" She flashed her ticket again, smirking at my bewildered expression. "Meh, I've had it awhile."

"But how did you get it!?"

Sandy's face took a darker turn, and suddenly she appeared much more solemn than usual. "I don't want to be treated differently. I like you for who you are, and I want you to like me for who I am right now. I don't want any of this to change, okay?"

I gave her a perplexed, bewildered, questioning look.

"Sandy's short for something." She responded quietly.

\_No.\_

"My full name's Alessandra."

\_No way. Nope. This is a trick.\_

"I run the Battle Factory in the Sinnoh battle park."

I knew Alessandra. I knew ALL the frontier brains and Tycoons by heart. They were in all the papers, and they were all trainers talked about. They were the best of the best, usually interviewed mocking the trainers that had tried to face them. It fit too well!

"My mom is Dahlia; she runs the Battle Arcade."

My brain slowly started to melt as the pieces slid into place.

"Ever since Thorton retired ten years ago, they hired me to fill in his place."

"Yâ€|you only would have been ten!" I stuttered.

"It's not hard; I beat the elite for when I was seven."

My jaw hurt from being unnaturally extended for so long. Did she train the PokÃ©mon that beat the elite four from such a young age!? Compared to her I was nothing, a seventeen year old without all of his badges, let alone the elite four beyond me. Did I even know her?

"â€|Do you see me differently now?" Alessandra asked quietly, with a hint of sadness in her voice. I looked at the ground, thoughts racing. How had I even developed feelings for this person that I hadn't even knew? What else didn't I know about her? Upon reflection, she really hadn't told me much about herself at allâ€| I didn't know what siblings she had, what her middle name was, or even if her parents were still alive.

â€|I knew nothingâ€|

"â€|Do you want to talk?" Sandy asked politely. Our PokÃ©mon around us stopped their own conversations, and looked at us curiously now that we had gone silent. For a rare time, we returned them to their Pokeballs, excusing ourselves for an evening alone.

"Yes pleaseâ€|" I nodded, head still bowed. We found a quiet clearing in the trees, with the gentle bubbling of a brook nearby. Sandy placed down a blanket, and we laid upon it together, watching the night sky, and listening to each other's slow, calm breaths.

"Soâ€|what do you want to know?" Sandy asked lightly, breathing into the cold, night air.

\* \* \*

><p>(Sandy POV)<p>

"What's it like?"

"â€|Stressful, at times. Exhilarating. Only a small amount of time is actually spent fighting, you know. Much more is spent studying, looking over the logs of the battle, figuring out what you did wrong, or right, and how you can improve."

"â€|Why did you come to Kanto?"

I shifted uncomfortably on the sheet. "G-get away, I guess."

"From what?"

"â€|Everything." I sighed. "There'sâ€|a lot of pressure. I'm not just a frontier brain, I'm Dehlia's daughter. People expect me to be the best, everyone wants a battle, and if I were to ever lose, it ends up all over the papers, and I would get calls non-stop. Battling became less of a sport and more of a force of pure stress, where if I slip up just once it's like I can't breathe for days."

"You don't like it?"

"Noâ€|" I sighed, frustrated with myself. "I like it, It's just a bit much some days. Kanto is different, it's calm. I can put my hair down and I won't be hunted by the paparazzi, and if I have a battle it can be for fun and not for keeps. Plus, wellâ€|"

"What?"

"I like it because you're here." I smiled awkwardly. "I get breaks every so often, and lately I've spent them all in Kanto just to visit you. You didn't like me because I was the best, or because I was famous; you liked me for who I was."

Josh didn't respond after that. His eyes were closed, and he rested his head on his hands. His breathing was deep and calm, and he seemed to be sleeping.

"Penny for your thoughts?" I prodded.

"â€|I don't know." He replied. "Perhaps I feel a bit distant. I do like you, and I'm flattered that you would choose to spend your time outside battles with me, but at the same time Alessandra is who you are also. I feel as if you've only revealed a portion of yourself to me, and that there's more that I don't know about you than I do. I feel a bit lost."

My throat tightened. Why did I feel guilty? I had never really lied to him, I had just never really explained much about my past. Our texts were mostly superficial, and our conversations involved our plans for the future, not our events in the past. I knew a lot about him, mostly because I had asked. He asked as well, but I had always managed to divert his questions, and regain control of the conversationâ€|

"I'm sorry." I whispered, after a moment of silence. Josh continued to rest, though in sleep or deep thought I did not know.

"Why didn't you tell me?" A voice rose from Josh. It wasn't accusatory or sad; he simply asked it like a simple fact.

"I didn't want you to see me like..." I faltered.

"Like I see you now?"

"â€|y-yeah."

Silence enveloped the air once again. I shifted on the blanket once more, unable to get comfortable on the small, pinkish sheet. After struggling for a moment, Josh reached and put an arm around my stomach, and pulled me towards him. My head landed on his chest, and he held his arm around me, shielding me from the cool, night air.

\_Thumpâ€|thumpâ€|\_

"I can hear your heart." I whispered, laying my head further on his chest, listening to his heartbeat. Josh ran his fingers through my hair and smiled.



The wind blew against us both, and I leaned closer towards him.

"How do you see me now?" I asked hesitantly.

A moment passed before he responded. "Well, I'm pretty sure I'm going to owe you dinner and a movie, so for one I'd call you a sneak." He smiled, hugging me closer. I giggled at his unexpected conclusion, then rested my head back on his chest.

\_Thump.\_

"Honestly though."

"Honestly? I...I guess I'm just a bit hurt. I wish you wouldn't have kept this from me, and that I knew more about you."

\_Thump.\_

I closed my eyes. "I'm sorry."

"For me hurting or for your actions?"

"â€|Bothâ€|" I responded after some thought.

"Why? My feelings are my own concern, and as for your actions, you had your reasons, which were not illogical."

"Your feelings are my concern!" I barked. Josh sat up and gave me a weird look.

"Why?" He asked, eyes covered with the shadows of the night.

"Becauseâ€|you're my boyfriend. And I care about you."

Josh turned to me, a large grin appearing on his face.

"D'aaawwwwww!"

"Oh shut up!" I exclaimed, punching his shoulder. He grinned and rubbed his shoulder before we resumed our normal position.

\_Thump.\_

"Are you mad at me?" I asked.

"No."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

\_Thump.\_

"Do you have questions?"

"Yes. Right now though, I prefer the tranquility of the night over my slew of questions."

"It really is beautiful tonight!"

"That she is."

I turned and glared at Josh, who gave me a sheepish shrug and blushed.

"That was the cheesiest thing I've ever heard in my life." I growled, swatting his nose with my hand.

"Yeah, well, take it or leave it." He grinned, face momentarily flushed with color.

"I'll take it." I smiled, and leaned forward, pressing my lips against his.

"How kind of you!" He mumbled sarcastically though the kiss. He brushed my hair gently with one hand as we kissed, feeling the warm air of each other's breath on our faces. Seconds turned to minutes in our embrace, and I pressed further into him as our kiss grew deeper and more intimate. Slowly, I moved my leg over his, and rested on top of him completely, still engaged in our kiss. I slipped, and in trying to regain myself pressed my knee into a place a knee shouldn't be pressed into. Josh cringed instantly, shrinking back into the ground.

"Thorey!" I mumbled, re-arranging my weight appropriately.

"Isssh okay." Josh slurred, still engaged in the kiss. I pressed my hand against his chest, and moved down, kissing his cheek, and slowly moving down his neck.

\_Thump!thump!thump!\_

I snaked my hand downward, rubbing against his chest and stomach, until I came over the fork in his legs. With the same hand, I started undoing the buttons.

\_Thump!thump!\_

Josh caught my hand, and held it in his own, and I felt him grin, laughing quietly to himself.

"Shut up, I don't have a lot of practice here!" I flushed, pushing myself off his chest so I could look him in the eye. He smirked back at me, green eyes gleaming in the night. "What are you smiling at!?"

"Might look a bit scandalous, don't you think?"

"What? Us in the woods?"

"No, the great and invincible Alessandra ousted as a pedophile."

I jumped off him, startled. "What!?"

"I'm seventeen." He grinned mischievously.

"You're what!? B-but you just graduated!"

"Skipped a grade." He smirked. "Don't worry, my birthday's in two weeks, so you're not too weird." He winked.

I resumed my coy gaze. "You're a piece of jailbait, you know that?"

"Oh shut up, you're like barely two years older than I am."

I looked him up and down, then looked back into his eyes. He cocked his head, and stared back into mine.

"Meh, you're worth the scandal."

"Pedo." He grinned, laying down on the blanket.

"Jailbait." I smirked, laying on top of him once more.

10. I want to get lost with you

(Josh POV)

[Nothing happened.]

[\_Liaaaaar!\_]

[Seriously!]

[Seriously a \_liar~!\_]

Static grinned knowingly as we all prepared for our flight. Sandy was gearing up her Charzard while I was putting the final preparations on Skarmorry. There was much to do; bags needed to be packed, and arrangements needed to be made. It was a long flight, especially with the extra weight of the trainer on the backs of our mounts. We needed to plan for meals, resting points, and many other factors before our trip.

[Un-]

[Shhh, Skarr!] I commanded, trying to focus.

[-necessary.] Skarr growled.

[We need to make sure you don't overexert yourself. We could just take a plane if it's too much stress-]

[JOSH. I have taken this pampering for far too long now.] Skarr tossed off the bag he held in the emphasis of his point.

[Skarr!] I berated.

[Josh!] Skarr berated back, staring directly back at me. I stumbled back, unnerved by Skarr's blatant disobedience. [This is absurdity! I am not Atlas; the sky is not my burden! Insisting I rest every minuscule moment I have flown is idiotic, and you know I am capable of more. I will not have you babying me like a hatchling!]

[Flying that long would make any PokÃ©mon tired, Skarr. We

need-]

[I'm not \_any PokÃ©mon \_Josh! I am a Skarmory; champions of endurance and the air. Our wings were created to be both durable under stress, and lightweight enough to fly. My kin spends months airborne without roosting, and often both mates and gives birth WHILE FLYING. And!] Skarmory punctuated the 'and' with a prod of his steel wing. [Might I remind you that eggs cannot fly! So the female must CATCH her eggs, mid-flight, WHILE still giving birth to other eggs!]

[â€|I find that unlikely.] I smirked, and gave Skarr a dubious look.

[â€|It's a rare event mind you; normally females can land in timeâ€|but it HAS happened! My point is, I have no trouble with land, and I give up my superiority of the air freely and without reluctance to be here, with you and the others. BUT! When the times should arise that you need a mobile steed, I shouldn't have to be 'suited up and prepared'. If it's a long flight, in \_your terms\_, simply grab a snack, and we'll be off. All this planning is both insulting and unnecessary.]

[I didn't mean to offend you Skarr, I'm just trying to look out for you.]

[I realize; I'm not upset, this over preparation just makes me feelâ€|]

A slight pause filled the air, as Skarr searched for the right word.

[â€|Silly?] Nova offered. Skarr and I both turned our heads to the small Charmander, not expecting him to speak up. Nova shrunk back at the sudden attention.

[Yes, 'silly'. I feel silly.] Skarr reluctantly admitted.

[Silly Skarr!] Wigglytuff cheered.

[Alterations are not clever, nor cute. You will refrain from addressing me as such from this moment forward.]

[Snarky Skarr!] Static joined in.

[Static, need I remind you that you do not need to be conscious during this trip?] Skarr walked towards him threatening with poison dripping from his sharpened, steel feathers.

[Scary Skarr!] Sandy jumped in.

[As Josh's companion, I respectfully ask that you halt your jesting. It is unbecoming-]

[Snooty Skarr!] I grinned.

Skarr turned to glare at me, with two dull yellow eyes. His gaze pierced right through my core, in pure, unfiltered annoyance. His neck snapped towards Nova, glaring daggers at the poor Charmander.

[Go on then.] Skarr growled, venom dripping from his feathers.

[G-go on w-with what?] Nova shrunk back.

[You started this, and you're going to finish it. Go on.] Skarr dared Nova, approaching him with wings flared. Nova stumbled backwards, tripping on a mound of dirt, then shielding himself against Skarr's presence.

[â€|Sâ€|s-super Skarr?] He pleaded.

[Good.] Skarr flapped twice, then tucked his wings back against his sides. [Now, for the sake of my sanity, can we please be off?]

[Sarcastic Skarr!] Static cheered.

Skarr collapsed into a silver mess of feathers, crumbling before me. [This is going to stick, isn't it Josh? I triedâ€|I really didâ€|]

[Sullen Skarrâ€|] I patted him gently on the top of his head.

\* \* \*

><p>(Skarr POV)<p>

[â€|]

[Guardians of the flames INDEED.]

[â€|]

[Well, at least we can live secure, knowing the seas of molten rock beneath our feet have such ferocious and enduring protectors.] I mocked.

[â€|]

[Come now, you must have some retort! Or have all the flames you have blown boiled your mind as well?]

[â€|It will not be today, and it will not be tomorrow, Slicer of the Winds, but one dayâ€|I shall destroy youâ€|] The Charzard panted, sweat coating her outer fur, and a mask of fatigue binding her features.

My beak contorted into a smirk as I flew slightly faster, slowly outpacing the draconic pokemon. The Charzard panted, and strained her wings to catch up.

[â€|The inner circles of hell shall beckon you in the afterlife...]

[Can't you just \_play\_ with me?] I mocked. [Can't we just have \_fun\_?]

[â€|This torture cannot be described as funâ€|I would say I have lost feeling in my wings, but in truth, I feel every pained flap. I have never felt this level of exhaustion in my life, and I'm sure I would have failedâ€|] Her thoughts cut off for a moment, and she lost some

altitude before recovering. [â€|If the punishment was not stranding my ledge in the endless seasâ€|]

[If you failed, I would have taken the task, and carried both humans. Your master's life was not truly at risk.] I shrugged.

[Even you could not support two trainers this distance.] She panted, grinding her teeth. I prepared a retort, but instead bit my tongue.

[Perhaps, but in a life or death situation, I could carry them a small way.] I reasoned. [Assuming you failed close to the island, I could reasonably ferry them a mile or two.]

[â€|I'm just glad it doesn't have to come for that. Any longer and I'm certain I would have falteredâ€|] The Charzard sighed, the island now coming into view.

I gracefully gained speed, and swooped towards the ground with my kin's natural elegance and grace. Seconds before landing I stalled and spilled the air beneath my wings, then landed expertly on my talons. Charzard was not as graceful, clumsily attempting to skid to a halt, failing, then collapsing on her stomach.

"Great job Charzard. Let's get you some rest, shall we? Thank you so much." Sandy slid off the Charzard's back, patting her graciously on the head.

[Ah, at last you are rescued from your toil. Not a moment too soon, hmmm?] I mocked one final time.

[I don't go back on my word, you waltzing mirror. There will come a time for us to duel once more, and on the battle field I \_will \_destroy you for your insolence.] She smirked an exhausted, under bite grin. [But until that dayâ€|I bid you adieu.]

[Adieu as well. Thank you for the company.]

Sandy pressed the Pokeball to her fur, and she disappeared in the far too familiar bath of red light.

[You too, Skarr! You did awesome, thanks so much! I have to admit, I thought flying over an ocean would take quite a toll, and I was worried!] Josh complemented, turning on his Pokespeak once more.

[Ill placed faith, as usual I see.] I grinned. [Not a hint of fatigue, and not a drop of sweat.] I said proudly, displaying my wings with dignity.

[CAN Skarrmory sweat?] Josh asked, the odd question crossing his mind.

[As if my kin were capable of something so uncouth.] I smirked, rolling my eyes. [We are always preened to perfection; not a feather out of place, and not a talon unfiled. Never smeared or scratched; always perfectly reflective and refined.]

[The perfect picture of vanity.] A female voice interrupted my thoughts. I turned to see Sandy grinning beside me.

[Vain? Oh, how I weep with your judgment!] I feel to the floor, covering myself with my wings. [Am I doomed to forever be labeled as a heathen; my pride dooming me to my downfall?]

[I didn't mean it like that-] Sandy began.

[Oh what pride had I!] I continued, pretending to sob. [Forever claiming my essence to the depths of demons simply for liking to be clean! Selling my soul for my reflective down, and my heart to the insatiable devils of the underworld just to look half-decent!]

[S-Skarr!] Sandy couldn't help but snicker.

[Like Icarus, I have flown too close to the sun, wishing to be cleanly in a world full of grime. Can my soul ever be redeemed!?!]

[Well, you're definitely not tired!] Josh chuckled. Sandy's face was pure red, both from blushing and laughter.

Once we calmed down, I took a moment to view my surroundings. Many tall buildings greeted the horizon, with many people and Pokemon bustling about. Josh looked expectantly at Sandy; his hands placed lightly in his pockets.

"Soâ€¦where to, my lady?"

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

[Anywhere!?!] Static looked up at Sandy with wide, unbelievably hopeful turquoise eyes.

[Anywhere.] Sandy confirmed, smiling to herself. [The rules are different here; all PokÃ©mon are assumed to be owned, so roaming by yourselves isn't frowned upon. There's plenty to do, and several PokÃ©mon-only activities, so we might actually be slowing you down!] Sandy snickered, then caught sight of my troubled expression. [â€¦That is, if it's alright with your trainer.]

[â€¦J-just make sure you travel in pairs, alright? And we'll meet back at the PokÃ©center at nine. If you don't know the time, just ask someone wearing a watch. And make sure to travel in pairs-]

[Oh COME ON!] Static whined, paws waving angrily in the air. [It's our vacation! Let us run around and stuff, don't make me babysit NOVA all day!]

[Static, I wasn't-]

[Don't 'Static I wasn't-' me! You were TOTALLY going to stick me with him! Can't I have one day-]

[I'll take Nova.] Myst interrupted. Static turned to her in bewilderment, and I smiled to myself.

[Wait, who would I be stuck with, then?] Static grumbled, still

confused by the turn of events.

[That would be me, my yellow nuisance.] Skarr purred.

[That's not better!] Static wailed.

[Whatever, I called dibs on Nova.] Myst stuck her tongue out at the Pikachu.

[I don't care, I don't want you either.] Static returned Myst's rude expression.

[Well, you're going to have to get along with someone.] I responded.

[Why?] Static whined. [Can't I just go with you?]

[No, someone needs to keep Skarr company. Remember, this is only a day, bud.] I smiled, and nudged Static with my shoe, which perked him up a little. [Also, Skarr! I'm trusting you to be the\_responsible\_one.]

[As always.] Skarr rolled his eyes.

[I'm serious! If someone does get lost, I'm going to need you there, by my side at nine to scout out the island and try to find them. Also, someone needs to look after Static while I'm gone, and I think you're the best fit. Okay?]

[Can do.] Skarr nodded more seriously.

[Alright. See everyone at nine, by the Pokemon center. Have fun you guys! And everyone thank Sandy for this opportunity!]

[Thanks Sandy!]

[Um, thanks!]

[Thank you very much!]

[We appreciate the sentiment.]

[Thank you VERY much.] I smiled, now thinking in private chat, and kissed her on the tip of her nose. She winced, and grinned back.

[You're very welcome. Shall we be off?]

[Where to, my lady?] I suddenly was overwhelmed by a sense of déjà vu.

[Where else, my soon opponent~?] Sandy hummed. [The Battle Factory!]

\* \* \*

><p>(Skarr POV)<p>

We walked for quite a ways, listening to the odd, yet familiar sounds of human communication bustle around us. Typically, Pokemon were not



allowed to roam far from their trainers, else they would be mistaken for wild. It was a rare and happy privilege to walk among humans without having Josh nearby. Not that I minded of courseâ€|usually.

Once we had gotten a fair ways, I turned back to Static, and gave him a sarcastic glance. Not at all unexpectedly, he gave me a confused glance back.

"What?" He asked thoughtlessly.

"How long to do you plan on continuing this faÃ§ade?"

"Fuh-what?"

"FaÃ§ade. Illusion, falseness, the act of doing something while harboring intentions of doing it's opposite."

Static stared at me for a moment. "â€|what?"

"LYING, Static. How long do you intend to continue lying!" I deadpanned angrily.

"What are you talking about?!" Static yelled, obviously still confused.

"I know you don't wish to spend the afternoon under my eyes, and I certainly harbor no intention of babysitting you throughout the day. It's clear that Josh has long since gone, so I was wondering, why are we continuing this faÃ§ade? Let us leave now, and we'll meet up at 8:30 at the PokÃ©mon center. We'll be back before Josh gets there, and we'll have the days to ourselves, instead of being subjected to each other's company."

"â€|but that's lying." Static concluded.

"Yes, Static, that is lying." I confirmed, rolling my eyes.

"Wouldn't Josh be mad?"

"That is why Josh won't find outâ€|" I slowly explained, not doing well in the task of masking my condescension.

"Oh. OH. I see." Static grinned. "Okay, okay, but you can't tell him, right?"

"â€|Sure."

"Great! Oh boy, oh boy! Okay, see you later Skarr!"

"Adiosâ€|" I muttered as I watched Skarr dash through a crowd of civilians.

At last, a day to myself. I had sorely needed this. Although I had claimed such a flight from Kanto to the Battle Park would be a small feat, I admit that I hadn't flown with added weight in quite some time. My wings were quite sore, and I felt like a well-deserved nap was in order.

\_After resting for a few hours, perhaps I could preen some of these loose feathersâ€|maybe bathe a bit in one of the lakes, to ensure my coat gets the proper reflective sheenâ€|\_

I landed on a roof of a tall building, and laid my head to rest. I felt warm and content. A perfect vacation indeed.

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

"Heyâ€|umâ€| "

[Yes?]

"C-can I ask you a question?"

[Yes, but only one, so choose wisely.]

"â€|Wâ€|what?"

[I kid.] Myst laughed, smiling at my awkward display. [Ask away.]

"â€|Why did you choose me?" I asked, after a slight pause. Myst stopped walking, and turned to face me.

"Why \_wouldn't\_ I choose you?" She demanded, reverting to her normal tongue.

"I-I don't know." I shrunk back.

"No, really. Out of them all, you're the one with the most experience with human architecture. You would serve as a good guide to a young fox, in the land of humans."

"Wellâ€|I don't know, I haven't gotten out that muchâ€|" I looked awkwardly aside.

"Wellâ€|" Zorua thought for a moment. "Well! Then we have something in common! Neither of us have seen many human buildings."

"Hey, you're right!"

"Exactly!" She smiled, and I smiled back. "I'm still going to need your help though. Do you know where we're headed?"

"Nope." I admitted, shrugging sheepishly.

"Do you know how to get back?"

"N-noâ€| "

Myst narrowed her eyes. "Can you identify any nearby structures?"

I looked around. Surrounding us were many tall, ominous building with large archways and big windows. Many people walked briskly around us, going in or out of the large edifices.

"They...they're buildings?"

Myst sighed lightly, and put a paw to her forehead. "See, this is why I chose you."

"Why, b-because I'm useless, and I need someone to help me?" I felt tears brimming in the base of my eyes.

"No, because if I have to get lost, I want to get lost with you."

I felt a weight lift off my chest. That almost feltâ€¦deepâ€¦coming from her.

"Thanksâ€¦!" I chirped.

"You can thank me by finding the PokÃ©mon center, so we have a point of reference. Hoist me up, will you? I'll create an illusion so we look like a person, so we get more space, and thus a better view."

I didn't know what illusion she was creating, but from the inside, it looked like the air was shimmering around us.

"Don't touch the border." She ordered, pointing at the edge of the mirage. "Now, give me your paw, and don't moveâ€¦" She tested my strength by pressing down on my paw, before darting onto it, and dashing onto my shoulders. From there, she placed her back paws on my collar, and hoisted herself up with her front paws hugging my head.

"Piggy back ride?" I inquired, laughing.

"Silence, steed!" Myst scoffed in a jokingly deep voice. "Go forth! Let us ride into the winds! Our quest beacons with the promise of glory and danger! Go, let us find our reference point, and avenge those lost in the brave battle ofâ€¦" She faltered.

"Battle-Parkia!" I added, filling the void.

"Precisely! Charge, noble steed!" She gently prodded the back of my neck with a paw, mimicking a kicking motion, and 'steering' me with her hands on my head.

"Neiiigh!" I cried, going into a light jog though the bewildered crowd of people. The illusion caused people to politely move out of our way, which made navigating through the crowds much easier. Once we were free of the larger crowd I broke into a run, grabbing Myst's back legs to ensure her stability.

"Where are you going?" Myst laughed as we ran through a grassy hill we clearly had not been through before.

"I don't know!" I admitted, giggling. "You're steering me!"

I raced down the hill, quickly gaining uncontrollable speed.

"Woaaah!" Myst commanded, pulling back on my head. I couldn't stop, and when I tried, I ended up tripping and tumbling with her down the hill. With an 'Oof!' we landed next to each other, dinged up and scratched.

I groaned, but managed to giggle at the obscurity of our situation.  
"Aaaahahahaâ€¦|."

Myst turned to me with a huge smile on her face. "Again, again!"

"You're crazy." I laughed, sitting up, and rubbing my head with one paw.

"Maybe!" She beamed, lying playfully on her back in the grass.

I pushed myself to a standing position. "Alright, fine, but not down the hill, alright?"

"Okay!" She smiled, a light blush crossing her face.  
"U-umâ€¦|"

"What?" I asked.

"Could you help me up first?" Myst pleaded sheepishly.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

"I have NO IDEA what I'm doing."

I grinned at the mildly annoyed secretary as she sighed softly, and went over her instructions again. I was in the Battle Factory! In only moments, I would have the honor of facing Alessandra, one of â€" if not the â€" strongest Frontier Brains in the Battle Park. Well, that is, if I could understand the directions.

"See this display?" The woman prodded the glowing blue monitor before me, which resembled a large desk with a touch screen.

"Yes?"

"You have an option of multiple PokÃ©mon on it. Once chosen, you cannot change. You will pick three, and Alessandra will pick three, but they will most likely not be on the same list. As such, you will have no idea what PokÃ©mon she will choose."

"Oh, I get it. And she won't know what I have to choose either, right?"

"Erm, no."

I gave the woman a confused look. She sighed lightly once more.

"Alessandraâ€¦| " She continued her elongated sigh, "â€¦| is a brain. That is, she has memorized \_every \_listing pair, and \_every \_conceivable option. Upon releasing your first PokÃ©mon, she will likely know the list you are using, and all options related to that list."

"Mhmm." My eyes widened a bit at this knowledge. What was I getting myself into?

"I have no idea why Alessandra would like to challenge \_you\_â€|" The secretary looked me up and down, clearly unimpressed. "â€|and with no recording, or media visuals, nonetheless. If I didn't know better, I'd say she was scared."

"Scared?" I grinned, with newfound confidence growing in my core.

"Trust me trainerâ€|I know better." And she shut the door, leaving me in darkness, save for the desk-monitor in front of me.

[Choose. A. PokÃ©mon.] A robotic voice hummed in my mind. I scrolled down the unfortunately small list. My options included an Infernape, an Alakazam, a Smeargle, a Ditto, a Salamence, and aâ€|

"What on earth is that?" I said out loud, looking at the strange PokÃ©mon, swirling on my screen with red and blue. I got out my phone, and aimed the camera at the image on the computer.

"\_Porygon Z.\_" It said simply. "\_This Porygon has been enabled to travel to dimensions beyond the intellectual capabilities of man-kind. This type of travel has had odd and unexpected effects, however.\_"

"The hell?" I looked inquisitively at my phone, and then back to the screen. I flicked carelessly at the monitor, bringing up its stats. It had a nice special attack, and good speed, but I would feel better using PokÃ©mon I was more comfortable with. I flicked back to the Infernape.

"\_Infernape.\_" My phone began.

"Shut up, I know what an Infernape is."

"\_The Fire Monkey Pokemon.\_"

"Cancel. Turn off. Shut down." I commanded, pressing several buttons at once on my phone.

"\_Infernape uses all of its limbs to attack, utilizing several different\_-"

I tore the battery out of my phone, causing the voice to crackle and disappear.

"That's better." I sighed.

I looked over the Infernape's moves and stats, pleased to see a familiar 'Fake Out' listed in the sets. Overall, it looked like the Infernape played by about the same rules as Static did â€" dish out as much pain as possible, and don't get hit.

\_I could work with that.\_

I clicked select, and the machine made a pleasant ding, registering that one out of my three choices was made.

"Alakazam isn't too badâ€|" I glanced at its stats. "Nice speed, awesome Special Attackâ€| yeah, this should cover Infernape pretty

well."

Lastly, I picked Salamence as my final. Who wouldn't choose an awesome dragon?

[You have selected your final PokÃ©mon. Would you like to re-select any?]

\_I thought the receptionist said I couldn't change?\_

[Re-select.] I choose out of curiosity.

[TOO BAAAAD!] The robotic voice was exchanged for a deep, cackling baritone as suddenly the room started to shift. The floor jolted upward, and in fright I turned to the door, which had now disappeared. I stood in the center of the room, bewildered, unsure of what was happening.

\_I'm in an elevator.\_

The thought crossed my mind like a wave, slowly calming me down. I wish someone had told me! The small room looked nothing like an elevator, and in fact looked rather lavish, with red cushion walls and the expensive looking desk monitor.

Light poured over me, and upon looking up I saw an automated gate open above me. The elevator stopped, pushing only the bottom of the elevator to the new floor. As I rose, I saw Sandy standing at a similar platform, looking expectantly in my direction. I cocked my head, and gave her my signature grin.

"Didn't expect that." I admitted.

"Josh!" Sandy exclaimed, unlike herself. She extended her arms; a show of power in the vastness of the arena. "Remind me, how are you still bewildered after seeing what secrets I hold? Bask in the glory of the Battle Factory, and relish this moment as the moment you get beatenâ€¦" She let her hair fall, and opened her eyes, revealing bright, hauntingly amber yellow contacts, now fully resembling the Alessandra I remembered. "â€¦by Alessandra, master, and Frontier Brain!"

\* \* \*

><p>I shot her a queer glance, and smirked to myself. "Are you recording this?"<p>

"By regulation, all battles in this hall are recorded." She spoke professionally. "However, for this battle, I have made a special exception. No cameras will be recording this. Just you and me, Joshâ€¦" She spoke menacingly.

"Oh? No cameras, huh? Don't want risk your loss getting on film, now do we?"

If any part of me thought that statement was correct, I was sorely mistaken. She laughed, then casted her cruel gaze on me once more. "No, no. Recently articles in the tabloids have been accusing me of 'lack of sportsmanship' when it comes to battles. They called me callous." Sandy put on a mock frown. "They claimed I didn't just beat

my opponents, I intentionally made them suffer for their mistakes, drawing out the battles, and forcing them to watch, helpless, as their mistakes caused their ruin."

"Why would someone lie like that?" I asked inquisitively.

"Lie? Oh, it's no lie, Josh." Sandy purred. "I like my prey to suffer before conceding defeat. I enjoy the pain in their eyes as they're slowly forced to watch me win."

"You're evil." I concluded, smirking.

"Not yet I'm not. The reason those cameras are off-" Sandy pointed left in a vague direction. "- is because no one else will be here to call me cruel, for what I'm about to do to you."

"Oh? Such hubrisâ€|" I countered.

"Hubris is for those whom do not truly possess the prowess I do." Sandy scoffed. "Back in Kanto, you claimed you thought you were better than me. I cannot allow this train of thought to continueâ€|"

"And what shall you do about this, my dear?" I implored.

"Destroy you, slowly. Crush you without mercy, though in such a way where you still believe you have a chance until the very end. Show you what a true battle is like, and truly persuade you-" She twisted around, snatching a PokÃ©ball off her belt, and smiled wildly with her unnatural, fierce golden eyes. "-that you never had a chance against the great Alessandra!"

"Convince me." I breathed, a determined grin on my face and a PokÃ©ball in my hand.

## 11. She's out of your league

A deep, rich, throbbing bass echoed through the arena, matching the quickened pace of my heart. The low notes reverberated through the air, shaking my very foundation with their harsh but compelling beats.

"\*\*If it's a FIGHT I'm ready to go!\*\*" The base pounded through the arena.

"Go, Infernape!" I commanded, tossing the black and white Ultraball to the middle of the stage. After a quick flash of light the Infernape appeared, already in a fighting stance.

'\*\*I wouldn't put my money on the other guy, if you know what I already know!\*\*' The bass quickened as Sandy smirked to herself.

"Go, Smeargle!" Sandy exclaimed, tossing the Ultraball to her side of the arena. The Smeargle appeared, balancing carefully on his pained tail. It wore a red bandana around its forehead, along with a tense, focused gaze.

[Infernape, use-] I winced as intense interference wracked the

signal. Sandy grinned, and shook her finger.

"Ah, ah, ah!" She smirked. "Not in here. Here, we do things the old fashion way."

\_Grrrrr!\_

"Infernape, use Fake Out!" I quickly ordered.

"Detect!" Sandy commanded.

\_No!\_

Infernape raced up just as a brown, transparent aura enveloped Smeargle. Infernape launched a multitude of punches and kicks, but they all seemed a second behind as Smeargle expertly dodged all of the blows.

"Infernape, Close Combat!" I wanted to save that move as a surprise tactic, but it was apparent she wouldn't be that easy of an opponent.

\_Smeargle wouldn't be able to reliably use detect again, and Infernape now has an insane type advantage " Close Combat alone holds three hundred and sixty base power, and won't miss. Smeargle can't survive that, and Sandy will be forced to switch out and thus have the attack land on another Pokémon, or take it, and force her Smeargle to be knocked out.\_

"Smeargle!" Sandy readied a command, with a haunting spark in her eyes. "Take the blow."

Infernape raced towards the Smeargle, socking him twice in quick succession with his fists, then sent him flying across the arena with an overpowered kick. I felt the reverberation of the bass happen in sync as the Smeargle crashed into the side of the wall, taking far too much damage to remain conscious.

\_Haha. Three-two, my favor, \_\_\*\*Alessandra\*\*\_\_.\_

"Smeargle, use Shell Smash, then Spore!"

\_WHAT!?!\_

\*\*'Don't CRY like a BITCH when you FEEL THE PAIN!\*' The bass rumbled, pumping the fast paced electronic rock.

The Smeargle slowly arose off the floor; his bandanna now turning to ash. With a quick movement of his arms, a shell appeared around him and shattered. Smeargle looked fatigued beyond belief, and could barely stand; yet he WAS still standing.

\_H-how could Smeargle have survived that!?My calculations weren't faulty; that attack should have knocked him out three times over!\_

"C-close combat again, Infernape!"

"Put him down, Smeargle."



The Smeargle waited patiently as my Infernape tore across the stage, with hands enveloped with an orange, fighting energy. With a hastened swipe of his tail, the Smeargle covered my Infernape with green spores, and Infernape crashed before him, asleep.

"No!" I screamed. "R-return!"

\_WHAT WAS I DOING!?!\_

"G-go, Alakazam!" I yelped.

\_Okay, all your Pok  mon are still at full health, even if she disabled one for now. She still only has a weakened Smeargle at her disposal, you still have this!\_

"Batton Pass. You've done well today." Sandy purred, returning the Smeargle to his Pok  ball. "Go, Porygon Z!"

\_Excellent. Although Porygon Z is fast and has high Special Attack, Alakazam is faster, and has just as high special attack. One super effective focus blast should be more than enough to end this fight!\_

"Focus Blast, Alakazam!" I commanded.

"Psyshock, Porygon Z!" Sandy sneered.

'\*\*But it's the little, petty SHIT that I  CAN'T IGNORE!\*\*' The music blared, deafening me with its obscene volume and intensity.

\_Hah! Not only will she not hit me, she chose a psychic attack! Alakazam has incredible Special Defense; that attack wouldn't even faze him!\_

Alakazam closed his eyes and summoned a bolt of fighting energy, but in an instant he was hit with a wave of purple energy. It washed over him, obliterating his attack, and knocking him to the ground. Alakazam didn't get back up.

\_W  what? I-it was slower  and that shouldn't have knocked it out  Alakazam has one of the highest Special Defense scores of all known Pok  mon!\_

"Are you going to gawk all day trainer, or will this battle end today?" Alessandra taunted, drumming her fingered on the monitor, the base quieting slightly.

\_O-okay, It's three to two, her favor. And one of my Pok  mon is sleeping  BUT, one of her Pok  mon is extremely weak, and my last Pok  mon is a dragon! I can still pull a victory from this yet!\_

"Go, Salamence!" I commanded, as a giant blue and red beast emerged from the reddish glow of the Pok  ball's light. Never before had I stood this close to a dragon before. If I thought Sandy's Charzard was intimidating, this took it to an extreme. From her rough outer coating to the sharp tips of her wings, it was clear she was only meant for one task. Her legs stood poised, proudly displaying the muscular build all draconic beings were known to possess. She roared

upon being released, shaking the foundations of the gym, and unnerving me to my core. Never before had I been in command of such a beast, and I felt it's power with every oversized breath of air she inhaled.

\_Try this out for size, 'Allesandra'!\_

"Salamence! Use Draco Meteor!" I commanded, striking my best deadly smile.

"Ice beam" Sandy droned, appearing almost bored?

A light beam hit the dragon unceremoniously, and Salamence crashed on her side, unconscious.

\_WHAT!? That was it!? H-how?!?\_

'\*\*With my FIST in your FACE and your FACE on the floor!\*\*' The base exclaimed, suddenly turning up in intensity.

"Well? Don't make me wait Josh; you'll find I'm very impatient" Sandy smirked, cracking her fingers together.

"Y-you've won." I shook my head in disbelief. Not in her victory, but in the realization I didn't know WHY she won. I couldn't reason why her strategies worked, or why my calculations in this arena were somehow fundamentally flawed. This had never happened before "not my loss of course, but an error in my formulas. Were their unknown variables I hadn't or couldn't consider?

"Not yet" She purred, playing with an ultraball. "You still have one Pokémon left."

"All three of my Pokémon are unconscious."

"Yes, but one is still capable of fighting."

"do you want me to send out my \_sleeping \_Infernape? It's ASLEEP! It can't withstand-"

"-Doesn't matter." Sandy interrupted. "The battle isn't over until all Pokémon on one side cannot battle."

\_I've already lost. Why was she doing this?\_

'\*\*Bet you got the message now\*\*'

"Go! Infernape?" With no other option, I tossed Infernape's Pokéball onto the field. Infernape appeared laying down, in a deep, almost coma like rest. I waited for Sandy to make a move "order Porygon Z to obliterate it with a Hyper Beam, or that oh-so-powerful Psyshock I had seen earlier. Surely a psychic move of that magnitude would knock out the fighting type Infernape.

But Sandy just stood there, not making a sound. I waited for the end, but after a moment passed and nothing had happened, I shot her a confused look. She shrugged and smiled in return.

\_ '\*\*Cause I was never going

\_â€|She's TOYING with meâ€|!\_

"Infernape, WAKE UP!" I shouted, loathe to give Sandy the satisfaction of watching me struggle, but also not wanting to stand at her mercy. The Infernape didn't move.

"INFERNAPE. WAKE UP and use Close Combat!" I ordered. The Infernape stirred, but still was not awoken. I heard sandy snicker, causing me to blush. This was the last resort of any trainer, of course. It was humiliating and it hurt my pride, but I reasoned it was better than nothing.

"\*\*INFERNAAAAPE\*\*!" I cried, mustering the loudest yell I could to overpower the drone of the bass. The Infernape's eyes shot open, and they darted around the room in recognition.

"Oh hey, look, you did it." Sandy smiled condescendingly.

"\*\*\_Infernape! Use Close Combat, NOW!\_\*\*" I commanded with the same forceful tone as before. I waited for Sandy to counter my move, but she remained strangely silent.

\_What is she doing!?!\_

"Nape-feeern!" The Infernape cried as he smashed his limbs mercilessly against the Porygon. The Porygon squeaked out a quick series of unintelligible sounds before collapsing to the ground.

"Oh noooâ€|" Sandy rolled her eyes, returning the fainted Porygon to her PokÃ©ball, then tossing another one without thought. The Smeargle from before appeared, and it looked even more exhausted then before.

"Close Combat again, Infernape!"

The Smeargle prepared a Detect, before shooting a confused look at Sandy. Sandy simply shook her head, and the Smeargle sighed sadly and winced.

\_What is she doing!? Why isn't she using Detect or spore, like she did before!?!\_

Predictably, Infernape's fists slammed against the Smeargle, knocking him unconscious. Infernape stood over his defeated opponent, and shot a challenging gaze at Sandy.

"Send out your last PokÃ©mon." I spoke, with an air of false confidence.

"How are you feeling?" She sneered, the music mysteriously turning itself down.

"What?"

"Think you got this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's one to one. Your PokÃ©mon is at full

health."

"And?"

"Wouldn't you say it was anyone's game?"

\_Whatâ€|what are you doing, Sandy?\_

"Iâ€|I don't know. I don't understand your methods." I admitted.

"Few do." She smirked, one final time. "Go, Ditto!"

\_I WON! Ditto's need one turn to transform, and instead of transforming into a new Infernape, that Ditto will transform into MY Infernape, with all of his stat drops from using Close Combat! It's defense will be two stages lowered â€" meaning at 50%! While it transforms, my Infernape can knock it out with one final Close Combat. Even if she's faster, she still needs a turn to transform, which gives me the opening I need!\_

The bass cranked suddenly came back, filling the arena with its heavy ear bursting rock.

'\*\*'Cause one of us is goin'â€|\*\*'

"Infernape!" I directed, smiling confidently for once during this match.

"Ditto!" Sandy ordered, with practiced poise and precession.

"Use Close Combat!" We echoed simultaneously.

"\*\*ONE OF US IS GOIN' DOWWWWN!\*\*"

\_W-what's she doing!? Ditto has no limbs; it hasn't transformed yet!\_

"Ferna!" Infernape screeched, sprinting towards the half-formed glob.

"Ditaaah!" In one swift motion, the Ditto launched itself upwards, becoming a mirror match of my Infernape, and socking my Infernape with a punch straight to the jaw. Unrelenting, the now fully-formed Infernape followed through ruthlessly with a series of kicks and punches, until finally knocking my Infernape to the ground.

\_NO!\_

"Fâ€|fuh.." My Infernape collapsed, eyes closed in admission of defeat.

\_Noâ€|\_

I looked up to see Sandy smirking in amusement. She began turning some dials on her monitor. The bass suddenly died down, and I realized she was the one controlling the disjointed, loud music. Did she really beat me while mixing and controlling those songs? Did she even try? I thought I was good, but compared to herâ€|

"Iâ€¦I don't understandâ€¦" I admitted solemnly in defeat.

"Don't be so hard on yourself."

Those were the last words I expected to hear from Alesandra. I knew she liked this â€" I knew she liked confusing and destroying her opponents. I knew she liked leaving me confused, and taunting me; giving me hope until the last second, then yanking it away, and watching me crumble under her watchful eye. Why was she being nice?

"I've had years of experience, Josh." She stepped down from the podium, and walked towards me. "I was born for this. I've been doing this all my life â€" I even was homeschooled just so I would have more time to battle. Of course the first time we battle I'll use some tricks you might not know."

I nodded, still troubled and confused. I had wanted to do this all my life, yet she ran circles around me. I had no trouble admitting defeat to a clearly superior opponent, but it bugged me I couldn't learn from my defeat.

Sandy caught the look in my eye. "Hey now, no being a sore loser!"

"What? I'm no sore loser!" I tried to grin, but faltered. "I justâ€¦you're totally out of my league-"

"I \_am \_pretty hotâ€¦" She interrupted, tossing her hair to the side. "But hey, you're not too bad yourself!"

"That's not what I meant and you know it." I deadpanned.

"I know." She smiled an honest, caring smile. "And I know your dream. I know you're not a sore loser, I know you're upset because you don't understand my methods."

"Yeah!" I grinned, satisfied she understood my confusion. "Could you perhaps teach-"

"Of course." She interrupted. "There's a lot of stuff I did, so we'll have to start from the beginning." She went to the ditto, and placed her hand outstretched near its head. An odd, wet sounding gurgle escaped the Ditto, and a blue bandanna similar to the one the Smeargle was wearing slid out of the Ditto's core. Sandy pulled it free, wincing momentarily at the bandanna's less than stellar appearance.

"Josh, do you know what this is?"

"â€¦aâ€¦bandanna?" I answered questioningly, knowing I was probably wrong. Sandy shook her head and smiled.

"We have some work to doâ€¦" She laughed, grabbing me by the waist, and wiping her Ditto-juice covered bandanna on my shirt.

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

[We did it!]

[We're the best!]

[Finding stuff experts!]

[Team DarkFire!]

[Woohoo!]

Myst and I laughed, collapsing in front of the Pok  mon center in exhaustion. It took us most of the day, but we finally found it. The large building was quite the site, and it was a symbol of our heroic victory, and a trophy of our successful quest.

[Hah  ] Myst panted in a mixture of laughter and fatigue.  
[  |so  |now what?]

[I don't know.] I admitted, giggling slightly in acknowledgement that I didn't plan on us actually succeeding. [Now that I've got my fish, I don't know what to do with it!]

[What?] Myst shook her head in confusion.

[Once,] I smiled. [When I was younger, I was playing at a lake one time. It was really pretty, but at the time, I guess I wasn't really paying much attention. I was splashing in the water, and for some reason, I wanted to catch a fish. It took hours, but eventually I got one. It started flopping all around, and it was pretty scary, so I dropped it back in the lake.]

Myst grinned in amusement. [Why did you try catching the fish in the first place?]

[I don't know!] I giggled. [It was just one of those things, you know? Like a challenge, to see if I could, I guess. But when I had it-]

[You didn't know what to do with it.] Myst finished, smiling in comprehension.

[Yeah.]

We sat in silence for a moment outside of the large building. Now that we were here, the same question was on our minds, but neither of us had an answer.

\_Now what?\_

[I, um,] I volunteered myself the first to break the silence. [I know a bit about Pok  mon centers. I could show you around if you wanted. You've never been in one, right?]

[Well, no, not really.] Myst admitted.

[Okay! I can show you around then!]

[Www  ] Myst made an odd sound, then fell silent.

[What?]

[Wâ€|wellâ€|] Myst began, [Iâ€|I don't know. I don'tâ€|like the idea of being inside a human buildingâ€|I guess. The restaurant wasn't too bad, but here, without my-, err, our trainerâ€|] She trailed off.

[OH! I understand! You're closet-phobic!]

[What?]

[Closet-phobic! You're afraid of small spaces!]

[N-no I'm not. I've hidden in spaces MUCH smaller than that-] Myst pointed to the rather large pokecenter. [-and haven't been afraid. In fact, I'm not afraid of \_anything\_, especially closets.] Myst stated proudly.

[Then why don't you want to go in?] I asked, taking a page from Static's book when he used to taunt me about my fears.

Myst fell silent.

[Come on! If you don't like it, we can leave. Okay?]

[Promise?] Myst rubbed her front paws together apprehensively.

[Promise. Let's go! Team FireDark!]

[That's DarkFire to you, \_recruit.] \_Myst bumped me playfully in the side. [And don't you forget it!]

\* \* \*

><p>Huge. Mind bendingly large, with shiny crystal things on the ceiling precariously hung on a thin piece of wire. From the inside, the PokÃ©mon center was an enormous space, filled with flawless white marble and strong looking, perfectly sculpted columns. I promised Myst I would show her around, but to be honest, I probably felt more out of place than she did.<p>

[Wow.] Myst mumbled, looking around in awe.

[May I help you?] Another voice entered our consciousness. We both jolted at the sudden intrusion, then adjusted our Pokespeaks back to the public speak option. Looking up, we noticed the man at the counter was speaking to us.

[W-what?] I stuttered, still not fully recovered from his sudden presence.

[Do you need healing? Are you looking for rooms?] The man enquired calmly.

[N-not yet, our trainer is still battling at places. Plus we, um, we don't have moneyâ€|]

[The hotel cost is included in the cost of the ticket. Assuming your

trainer got here, he or she has a ticket, yes?]

[Yeah, he has a ticket!] I remembered.

[I figured.] The man smiled warmly. [If you can give me your names, I'll put them in the computer. When your trainer comes by, he'll see he already has a room reserved, and he'll see your names inside. Is that okay?]

[Mmhmm!] I nodded enthusiastically. [Thank you so much!]

[Not at all; happy to be of service.] The man bowed politely. [Now, what are your names?]

[Nova!] I recalled, happy at my name. I waited a moment for Myst to say hers, but she remained strangely silent. I turned to her, and she had her head placed on the floor, and looked veryâ€|unnerved. [â€|a-and this is Myst!] I said after a moment of hesitation.

[Nova and Myst. Excellent, you are in our database. Here is your key,] The man handed me a small card that I recognized as the strange hotel keys. [And enjoy your stay.]

[Will do mister, thanks so much!] I chimed, and walked off with Myst. Our room was 114, which, from following the doors, I knew was close by. I turned to Myst again, who was walking behind me with her tail between her legs.

[Are you okay?] I asked, concerned.

[Ironical that our places would be altered so quickly.] She laughed hollowly.

[What's wrong?]

[C-can we get away fromâ€|everyone, first?]

[Sure. This is our room. Only we can get in, plus people we let in, of course.]

I put the card in the slot in the door, and it opened magically like before.

\_I wonder if humans are just PokÃ©mon, and their power is technology.\_

We entered the room, and it was just as nice as the entrance. There was a flawless marble bathroom, a giant television, two dark purple plush beds, and a giant window that was currently covered by two large, lavender curtains.

I shut the door, and looked at Myst. Her eyes were full of unease, and she shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot.

[So, um, are you closet-phobic?] I prodded.

[No, it's not about the closet!] She snapped, then instantly looked apologetic. [Sorry, I didn't mean-]

[-Don't worry about it.] I waved it off, and walked near one of the



beds, pleased to see it had a small stepladder leading up to it for smaller Pok mon.

[Well, I mean, I know you're sensitive; I shouldn't have yelled.]

[I'm used to it. It's okay.] I shrugged. I realized I probably should have worded that better when I saw Myst cringe. [Really, it's fine!] I insisted when I saw her squirm.

[Regardless, I apologize.] She fumbled. [Um, anyway, c-can you show me around the room?]

[Better! Get up here.] I offered my hand, and helped pull her on top of the mattress. [Have you ever watched T.V. before?]

[No?] She questioned.

[It's awesome! Sometimes if I was good, Matilda would let me watch it.] I fumbled to my side, trying to reach the remote on the bedside table. After a moment or two I caught it with my paw, and pressed its power button.

[What does it do?] She turned to the television, interested in its sudden change and the increased volume in the room.

[It tells stories!] I exclaimed. [Anything you want. I can't read well, but I can a little bit from watching so much.]

[You can read?] Myst stared at me, mildly impressed.

[Mhmm!] I nodded happily.

[Cool. Go on.]

[Uh, yeah, anyway, it can play any story you want. It can be silly, serious, scary, fun, happy, romantic, cartoony ]

[How intriguing ] Myst thought quietly.

[Is there anything you want to watch? Or do you want to talk about why you were ]

[Were ] She stared, daring me to finish my thought.

I gulped. [ troubled .earlier.]

[I I don't know. Perhaps it is due to all of this unfamiliarity.] She began. [People everywhere, Pok mon everywhere, and they can all \_see me. \_I'm use to illusions to cover my tracks, but here where it's okay to be seen I just feel lost. I feel open. I don't I don't like it.] Myst shuddered and wrapped a paw around me. I was surprised, but I returned the embrace nonetheless. She sighted softly, and nuzzled me in my chest with the tip of her nose.

[Anyway, entertain me with this device! You said any story, right?] She chimed, suddenly brighter.

[Well, maybe not everything, but like, every-]

[I would like something funny and amorous.]

[Um, okay!] I turned to the television. [Rô€|omanticâ€|] I typed slowly on the remotes rather clunky interface. [â€|Câ€|omedyâ€|]

A list appeared of different movies, and I selected one at random which looked amusing.

[Oh.] Myst thought suddenly. [They're of humans?]

[Most are.] I shrugged. [I should have told you. Sorry, I guess I'm just use to it.]

[It's fine.]. Myst snuggled closer to me. This wasn't like her. I expected her to break off the embrace instantly as soon as we hugged, saying something like 'Don't tell Static' or 'This never happened' or something, but sheâ€|hadn't. I didn't mind the closeness, but it did strike me as odd that she was being soâ€|

\_Trusting?\_

I turned on Pokespeak subtitles, and laid back with Myst. She put her paws around me like before, and curled her head into my chest. It was a pleasant sensation â€" I wasn't use to the feeling of warmth she gave off while we snuggled. After a few moments I gave in, and rested my head on her as well. It felt like a warm pillow, filled with smooth, silky fur. I felt her breath against my chest, tickling my orange tinted coat with each exhale.

I looked at the clock on the bed stand. It was a bit past four, which would give us a few more hours before we needed to meet with Josh again. I smiled content. This was exactly where I wanted to be â€" watching television with a friend, without scary things. A quiet, enjoyable evening.

\* \* \*

><p>(Myst POV)<p>

\_Bored, boring, bored, extremely, unyieldingly, irreversibly-\_

"Hey Myst, how are you liking the movie?"

"It's great!"

"Cool." Nova smiled, and snuggled back against me. I sighed soundlessly, with seething irritation.

'\_I'm a thief!\_' \_I thought, frustrated. '\_I \_\_\*\*take \*\*\_\_what I desire!\_'

I looked back at Nova as he giggled at the people acting in the moving picture. I looked over him, making sure to cast a subtle illusion over my eyes, so Nova didn't catch my wandering gaze. He was smooth for a fire-breather â€" most were jagged and rough, but he was curved and soft against my quiet stare. He had fur, unlike his kin who normally were more reptilian.

He wasn't brave. He wasn't particularly strong, or courageous. Why

did I feel this way about him?

\_'It doesn't matter.'\_ I reasoned to myself. \_'Any object worth wanting is worth having, if you have the skills at your disposal to obtain it'\_'

I prodded his chest with my snout, to get his attention.

"Mmmm?" He paused the movie, and turned his attention to me. "What's up?"

"Oh sorry, I just, um, thought I needed to sneeze." I lied, my mind racing.

"Okay." He flipped the movie back on.

\_I CHOKED. I \_\_\*\*never \*\*\_\_choke! What is wrong with me!? Augh, now if I poke him again I'll look like a fool!\_

Nova shifted slightly, and leaned further into one of the pillows, sighing contently. I mirrored his move, but made a fatal error in misjudging the distance, and fell comfortably beside him

on my back.

\_Damn! Damn, damn, damn!\_

"Are you okay like that?" Nova asked adorably.

"Yeah, it's comfortable." \_I can't move! \_"Plus I can see the screen better." \_This is humiliating!\_

"Okay." Nova hummed happily, directing his attention back to the screen. I ground my teeth, bent on, for once, overcoming my disability through sheer willpower.

\_Turn, damnit! This isn't that \_\_\*\*HARD\*\*\_\_, you can make your illusions do it! You know how it would work, just shift your body'!\_

After lying prone for minutes with no results, I begrudgingly accepted my fate as a glorified paperweight. I never knew why I had such trouble with this; even from birth I needed help to roll over. Perhaps it was the same mutation that affected my eyes, or perhaps an outside influence severed a crucial muscle, but whatever the reason, I loathed it with every fiber of my being.

\_I suppose there are worse places to be helpless, though'!\_

I looked over at Nova, who was clearly enjoying himself. Every few moments he would laugh, filling the air with his innocent, perfect chime. Afterwards, he would turn to me, (\_TURN! Auugh how I envied him!) \_and look at me with those perfect blue spheres that reminded me of the ocean he feared so much. He would ask if I understood the reason for his mirth; the laughter that has so previously filled the room. Of course I would say yes, even though I didn't. It was likely I wouldn't have understood even if I was paying attention, and not wondering why I was suddenly more cowardly than him when the prospect came to stealing what I desired most in this flourished, lavender room.

I wasn't fearful. Humans in large quantities unnerved me, but not to the extent I described to Nova earlier. I wanted him to empathize with me; to see me as closer to him than the others, which was the reason behind my façade. But this—this wasn't fake.

Why is this so difficult!?

More than anything, I felt hot. The room wasn't stuffy, but with the lazy sunlight pouring through the window, and Nova's warm fur brushing against mine, I felt my eyelids threaten to drop. The moving picture Nova cared for so much was doing little to keep me awake—

I will not fall asleep—it would not only be rude to Nova, it would ruin the chance I have now!

I couldn't move anything but my limbs. If given enough time, I may have been able to use the momentum from rocking my legs back and forth to turn over, but Nova would have laughed at me. Instead, I laid back, immobile.

My inaction wasn't due to my disability—I would like to believe it was, but I knew better. If it was, I wouldn't have been able to tell Nova how I felt. I wouldn't have been able to grab his muzzle and lure him into that first intoxicating, slow kiss. I wouldn't have been able to force kiss after kiss on the muddled but intrigued Charmander, bending him to my voracious, ravenous hunger for his sweet, confused embrace—

—all those things I could do, but none of those things I did. Instead, sleep claimed me for one of its own, and I fell into a troubled, annoyed slumber.

## 12. An Introduction To The Broken

(Static POV)

What an awesome day!

The sun was shining, Skarr was gone, and I was ready to have some fun. If I could find any, that is—

Why does everything have to be so big?

I wandered aimlessly around trying to find any of the attractions Josh was telling us all about earlier. He hinted that there were several Pokémon-only activities, but I couldn't find a single one. I was annoyed, but something else too. I wished I was with Josh. Even boring stuff he would make entertaining. I kicked a rock. Nearby, a Meowth walked out of a nearby alleyway.

Wait. I should try asking —\*\*other\*\*— Pokémon where the fun stuff is!

Excited by my new idea, I dashed over to the Meowth. The Meowth looked me over with a cool, uninterested gaze.

"Hey, um, excuse me!" I waved to get his attention, and received only

a bored blink in reply. "Um, yeah. I was wondering if you knew where the fun stuff was!"

"Fun?" He questioned. For a second, his green eyes sparkled with interest. "That depends on your definition of fun."

"What else!? Battling!"

Now he was interested. His eyes shone with interest, and his tail swung back and forth. "I know a place. Any humans with you?"

"No?"

The Meowth quickly shot a glance to the left and right, then nodded satisfied. "Yeah, I'll show you a battle you'll never forget. Follow me!"

He dashed back into the alleyway. I bounded after him, until we reached the end. He smirked.

"Where do we go now?" I asked.

"Down." The Meowth pointed at a Manhole cover in the ground. "I know you won't tell anyone, but there aren't actually sewers here. Everything just gets flushed into the ocean."

"Then what's the sewer-hole thing for, then?"

"There's a beautiful cave next to the cliff that overlooks the ocean. It's perfect for sightseeing and for the battles I know you're after."

"Awesome!" I grinned.

Meowth made an 'after you' motion with his paws, and I happily climbed down the rather narrow passageway. The ladder went down quite a while before ending up in a poorly lit room. I could make out a few other Pok mon there, along with a small exit. Judging on the light pouring in from the exit, I assumed that was close to the cliff side.

I earned a few nods from the other Pok mon before stepping out into the exit, and thus a larger room. It was built like an arena. The circular stage had a large, seven foot wall around the stage, and above that were rows and rows of chairs. All sorts of Pok mon sat in them, from Koffings to Purrloins. I watched in happy awe at the sheer size of the field. What kind of battles did they have here?

"Snivel? Is that you?"

Every happy emotion I was experiencing was instantly drained away. The fur on the back of my neck crawled on end, and heavy sweat began to coat my forehead. My breath quickened. No one knew me by that name. That was my old name "back when I was still wild, back before Josh "back when I was still a member of the wild Pikachu.

I didn't dare turn around. There was only one person that sounded like that. That hardened, dead, scratchy voice. It was different now,

but it was unmistakable. No one else sounded like that.

I forced myself to turn, dreading it with every cell in my body. I saw him. He was different now â€" a Raichu. He looked terrible. Dark circles surrounded his eyes, casting a sickly shadow on his already dark forest green eyes. He looked under fed, yet muscular. His fur was grayer then it should have been â€" he was only a few years older than me â€" and he had several patches where he simply didn't have fur. Some of it looked burnt off, and others looked like it had been torn. One of his ears was only half there, and was poorly stitched to prevent further damage. The normal swirls around his wrists were pointed and jagged, and collections of scars adorned his intimidating frame.

"I never thought I would see you again. How's it going Sniv?" The Raichu approached me, carelessly ignoring my obvious fear.

"N-not bad. H-how about you, Rough?" I gulped.

"It's Overdose now." Overdose spat. I cringed as the Raichu towered over me, paw in fist.

"I, um, I see..." I stumbled.

"Small world. Once clan members, then we were torn. Thrown across the world by humans for a little \_prank. \_They would have killed us if not for the Treaty."

"Treaty?" I asked, terrified yet curious.

"\_You shall not harm non-hostile PokÃ©mon."\_ Overdose ground his teeth. "Now that we weren't a threat, they couldn't touch us. Technically. They could move us, however. And that they did. Stranded me on this shitty piece of ROCK." Overdose stomped his foot into the ground, enlisting a rumble from the earth.

"I'm sorry for thatâ€¦" I mumbled, trying to squeeze away.

"That's not the worst part, though. Do you know what was?" I shook my head, and Overdose brought his face inches from mine, until I felt the heat of his breath on my face. It was rancid. "They didn't know of our hiding spot. The cops that found us. Only we did. The humans wouldn't have found us without help."

"H-how do you-"

"Only one of us left the group, Snivel." His breath burned against my eyes.

"That's not true-"

"Everyone else came back but you."

"I didn't-"

"\*\*\_You're a BAD LIAR, SNIVEL!\_\*\*" A fist caught me in my gut, and sent me to the ground. In a second I was back up, electricity sparking from my cheeks.

"\_YOU WANT TO GO!?!\_" I yelled, as intimidating as I possibly could.

"You think I'm as helpless as I was before!? You think you showed strength, defeating a defenseless low level like me!? I'd like to see you try now!"

"Not like this." Overdose commanded. He pointed vaguely at the stage, and two purple Pok  mon with gems for eyes darted before me. The first one raced at me with a purple claw oozing with a black poison. I sidestepped him and sent a stream of electricity at the second. His gemstone eyes gleamed a second before he was hit, and instantly he appeared before me, and bashed my head with the side of his claw.

I reeled, then dodged another blow from the first strange Pok  mon. It struck again, and I narrowly avoided its acid cloaked claws as I felt the wind of the attack brush against my fur. I retaliated with a strike of my own, as the orange fighting energy covered my fist and struck straight \_inside \_the purple Pok  mon.

"What!?" I screeched, and pulled my paw free from inside the mysterious Pok  mon. Its gems gleamed suddenly as it cackled. Something hit me from behind, and everything went dark  

\* \* \*

><p>"  not  
responding  " <p>

"n  .don  .will  ."

"It  .he's  ."

"It'll work. It always does."

Suddenly, I was conscious. Invigorated. I didn't know where I was until I quickly looked around, and I realized I was once again in the arena  \_inside \_the arena. One of the weird purple Pok  mon was at my sides, and he was holding a now-empty stained reddish syringe. I struck at him instinctively, but he vanished into mist as soon as my paw struck him

"Don't be mad at them. It's you and me who have a score to settle, \_Snivel.\_"

"Don't call me that!" I growled fiercely.

\_Where did \_\_\*\*that \*\*\_\_come from?\_

I was terrified of Overdose. He was the one that broke the group, that beat me up at the orchard, and that caused a massive power outage in the human city. Why  why did I suddenly feel angry instead of scared?

"Fight me then, alone, you coward!" I hissed, suddenly furious.

"I intend to, but this will not be a normal fight. History lesson, Sniv." Overdose grinned an evil smirk as he extended his arm to the left. "Pok  mon didn't use to faint before. Hundreds of years ago, Pok  mon would fight to the death with their powers. Only after the Ancient Ones put limits on our abilities did we faint instead of die. This allowed us to learn from our mistakes, and get stronger and wiser."

"Who cares!?" I growled.

One of the gem-eyed Pok  mon carrying a full syringe spawned next to Overdose, and injected him with the strange red fluid.

"Because humans are clever  " Overdose twitched as the fluid was injected into his veins. He sighed suddenly, and shook his head. "T-they found a way of  bypassing  the restrictions placed on us. Though a virus, and a mixture of other, fun chemicals." Overdose's pupils widened as he smirked.

I panted suddenly, and was overcome with heat. Sweat soaked my coat, and I looked at the small hole in my arm again. "W-what did you put into me!?"

"Just something to ensure you won't faint again. I want to make sure you're awake for this  " Overdose flicked his wrist, and it cracked horribly. I was filled with anger, but my fear was slowly overpowering it, especially at the realization the anger wasn't my own.

\_What did they put in me!?\_

"I'm looking forward to smearing you all over the walls, Snivel." Overdose shuddered as the strange purple Pok  mon injected him a second, then third time. "I can't wait to show you, in \_explicit detail\_, what happens to garbage like you. I'll kill you, and smear your blood in the sands of the arena, for all to see and smell! Garbage little \*\_BITCH!\_\*"

He charged.

\* \* \*

><p>By the time I raised my hands in defense, it was already too late, I left his paw smash into my jaw, sending me reeling on the floor. I bounded up instantly, electricity crackling around me.<p>

"Cha!" I shouted, and raced back at him, with both my arms igniting with fighting energy. He smirked as I bounded towards him, and blocked my first punch with his muscular arm. In a fraction of a second, I punched him in his gut and side, both fists acting like pistons, and firing off at blinding speeds. I felt my arms move faster than they ever had before, and I felt a moment of clarity as I was attacking.

\_I'm being reckless! I've never used Brick Break with both paws, especially this close at range! This  this isn't right. This isn't even the same attack. I'm using Close Combat! B-but I thought Josh said I couldn't learn-\_

An oversized paw smashed into my muzzle, and I flew across the stage before skidding to a halt. My vision blurred, but I didn't feel weakened by the attack like I usually did.

\_Did  did that even do damage?\_

I tested my jaw, and found it  hurt. Attacks weren't supposed to



hurt. They just dealt hit point damage, and made me faint. Whyâ€|why was I starting to hurt?

"Rai!" Overdose shouted, jumping into the air. His paw shone with fighting energy, and erupted into what looked like a comet. I dashed to the side, narrowly avoiding Overdose's attack. I looked back to see a crater where I was standing.

\_What WAS that!?!\_

"RAI!" Overdose feigned a punch which I dodged, then bounced up and kicked me with both legs. I bounced off the gritty floor before flipping myself back to standing. I panted, my cheeks crackling with unused electricity.

"I'm going to enjoy thisâ€|" Overdose growled, walking menacingly towards me.

"Chaaa!" I screeched. Suddenly the lights went dim as the strongest wave of electricity I had ever summoned came crashing down on Overdose. I had never seen a bolt of electricity this large before in my life, not even in natural thunderstorms. It crashed against Overdose, and all the sand in the arena blasted back from the resulting sonic blast.

Overdose grinned, still in the epicenter of the strike. He looked completely unscathed.

"WHAT!?" I screamed out loud.

"You have much to learn, Static. Shame you never will." Overdose grinned, and summoned the same lightning bolt I did, but this time it was even larger. It smashed against my chest, singeing my fur and sending me soaring across the arena, and into the surrounding concrete wall.

It took me a second, but I finally managed to begin breathing again. I crawled out of the wall, and then fell to the floor.

\_â€|whyâ€|why am I still conscious? I should have fainted two attacks agoâ€|\_

I coughed, some red substance making its way to the sandy floor below. Across the stage, Overdose laughed.

"Well, get up then. I'm not done with you yet, you piece of shit." Overdose ordered. The crowd cheered at Overdose's crudeness, and egged him on to finish me off. I slowly rose to my feet, wiping what I realized was blood off of my muzzle.

As he ran towards me, I faked a head-butt before racing towards the wall, and bouncing off. My fist glowed orange once more, and I aimed it at Overdose's face.

Too slow. Overdose caught my fist and pulled me out of the air. Using me like a mace, he swirled me around before smashing me into the ground.

\_Auughhâ€|\_

I steadied myself with a paw just as a yellow blur smashed against my side. My core exploded in pain as I was sent reeling across the stage, before skidding to a halt in the unforgiving sands.

The crowd roared in approval. I whimpered slightly, clutching my chest in agony. Whatever he just did hurt much worse than anything before, and judging by the crowds response, it was likely their favorite move. I looked up to see Overdose walking towards me cockily, swirling his tail around like a whip. I recognized the yellow blur now " it was the thunderbolt at the end of his tail.

"Now don't just lay there, Sniv. At least look like you're putting up a fight." Overdose grinned, walking ever closer to me.

\_Why does this hurt? Battling|battling shouldn't hurt|\_

He picked me up, and smashed his fist into my gut before throwing me back to the floor.

"Come on, you piece of garbage!" Overdose spat. I gagged on the floor, and steadied myself with a paw, trying to see if I could still put weight on any of my limbs. "There you go. See? Easy."

He lifted me up the rest of the way, and then grabbed me by the fur on my chest. I looked at him in the eyes|at this point, it felt like one of the only things I could do.

"I'm going to enjoy this, Snivel." Overdose grinned, his other paw glowing with orange energy.

"|What happened to you, Rough?" I whispered, barely able to talk. My question caught him off guard, and he took a step back.

"What?"

"What happened to you?" I repeated, struggling not to choke on my bile. "Was life really so bad here that it did this to you? |was it your trainer?"

Overdose looked at me with an unreadable expression. "My trainer has nothing to do with this. He feeds me and allows me to fight. What more can you expect from a human?"

"You know there's more than just that|you know that, Rough, as much as I do."

"You know? You \_think you \_\_\*\*know\*\*\_!? You want to \_act \_like you \_know, \_you little garbage ass BITCH!?"

Overdose threw me aside, then caught me with a whip of his tail. He hit me in the same side, and I felt the all too familiar pain of ten-thousand volts coursing through my being in the same second. I bounced across the merciless floor immobile, as Overdose screamed at me once more.

I could barely move. My paws only shook when I tried to stand again, and I couldn't lift my head. I could hear Overdose walking closer to me, shouting something about 'what I thought I knew'. All I knew was

pain. I felt the fur on the back of my neck being grabbed, and Overdose lifted my face off the ground, then grinded it back into the sand.

"YOU WANT TO ACT LIKE YOU KNOW, YOU PIECE OF \*\*\_SHIT\_\*\*!?"

Overdose lifted my head once more, and smashed it into the ground. Still grabbing me, he dragged my face across the sandy floor. I would have screamed if I could â€" it felt like fire as the sands tore across my skin. Blood seeped out of the wounds that the sand created, and the resulting sand got mixed in with the blood on my face.

"I'm going to BREAK YOU."

He smashed my face against the ground, and I heard my nose crack against the floor. My nose bent at an unnatural angle, and this time I was able to scream.

"And thenâ€|when I'm through with youâ€|"

He tossed me aside, and I fell limp to the floor.

"Then you'll know what it's likeâ€|"

He jumped into the air.

"TO BE ME!"

I felt his hind legs crunch into my back, as the earth around me exploded into fragments. Rocks flew to the sides, and everything went black as I screamed in agony.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

[Skarr, I can't believe you.]

Skarr preened himself in embarrassment, as we all stood in a circle outside the PokÃ©mon Center. All of us were here except for Static and Myst, though Nova explained Myst was sleeping inside our room. It was nine pm, and Skarr just admitted to leaving Static to his own devices as he took a nap on a roof.

[I trusted you to look after him!] I scolded Skarr. Skarr refused to match my gaze, and stared at the floor guiltily. [That was the deal. You guys could all go out \_if \_you kept an eye on each other! Aughâ€|] I put a hand to my forehead. [I \_knew \_this was a bad ideaâ€|]

"Josh." Sandy put a calm, reassuring hand on my shoulder. "He'll be fine. He's probably just messing around and lost track of time. We'll find him, relax."

"I know we'll find him Sandy, but when? Hours, days? What if he's hurt, or doesn't know how to get back?"

"Well, that's why we'll start looking now." Sandy cleared her throat, then reverted to her Pokespeak. [Okay, listen up. Skarr! Remember this area. You're going to do a fly-by of the park to look for

Static. Wigglytuff! You go with Nova, and patrol to the south. Don't leave each other's side! Josh, you take the east part of the park, and I'll take the west. If none of us find him, then one of us will go to the north, while the others go to the areas we've already explored. If he comes back to the room-]

[I left Myst a note to tell Static to stay there if he comes back.] Nova nodded.

[Good.] Sandy commended. [Alright, everyone knows what they're going to do. Josh, are you okay?]

[â€|Yeah.] I lied, nodding sharply. [Unless you are WITH STATIC, everyone be back here at ten pm, no exceptions. Let's go.]

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

"â€| "

"What?"

"â€|This is stupid."

"What!? Looking for Static?" Wigglytuff yelped, glaring at me. She grew twice in size, and placed her tiny paws at her hips in fury.

"No. No! That wasn't what I meant!" I gulped, trying to calm her down. She let out her breath, and resumed her normal, but still larger-than-average size.

"Oh. What are you talking about then?" She inquired.

"The \_way \_we're looking for him is stupid. You LIVE at this park. You've been here all your life, with Sandy, right?"

"Yeah? So?"

"Then you know this place pretty well, right?" I reasoned.

"Yeah." Wigglytuff nodded.

"Then you should be exploring by yourself. You don't need someone to walk with you; you're not going to get lost here."

"â€|You're right." She squinted, confused. "â€|wait, no one is looking to the north. Why didn't they send one of us this way, and one of us to the north?"

"They're worried about me." I rolled my eyes. "They think I need someone to look after me, so they sent you."

"Well, you are kind of a cry baby." Wigglytuff shrugged.

"Thanksâ€|do you want to find Static or not?"

"Of course I do!"

"Okay, then listen here. You go to the north and look for him. I'll keep going this way. We'll meet back at ten, and this way we'll cover the whole park."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"No." I admitted.

Wigglytuff looked me over eyeing me cautiously. She then shrugged, and hugged me quickly. "Fine. Stay safe!" She yelled behind her shoulder as she ran to the north.

"I'll tryâ€¦" I muttered. Luckily, this time I made a mental note of the PokÃ©center, so I wouldn't get lost as easily.

\_I hopeâ€¦\_

\* \* \*

><p>I shivered as a small chill grew in the air. The breeze blew past my coat, ruffling my bright orange fur. Behind me, my fire crackled dimly in the darkened streets.<p>

"S-Static?" I tried to call out, but it was scarcely more than a whisper. The shadows on the buildings danced in synchrony to my movements, only summoned on the walls due to my tiny flame.

"S-Staatic?" I hated how whiny my voice sounded.

\_Man up! What would Josh say if he saw you cowering like this!? I mean, well actually he would probably say something comforting, like "It's okay to be afraid, the important thing is facing your fear", but that's not important right now! Aughâ€¦where am I?\_

I looked up, trying to get my bearings. I remembered the PokÃ©center was to myâ€¦riiight? I think?

\_Crap.\_

Suddenly, the ground shook beneath my feet. I fell backwards, and scrambled upwards. Just as quickly, the tremor stopped. None of the buildings around me looked damaged, and there was no one around me to confirm what I just felt.

"H-hello? Anyone?"

I heard the slight ringing sound to my left. I turned, and saw a pitch black alleyway.

\_Nope.\_

I heard the ringing again.

\_Nope. Nuh-ah. There's no wayâ€¦\_

I shook, hard. That ringing was the only sound I had heard since leaving Wigglytuff, and as of now was my only lead. I took a shaky breath.

\_Bravery. Courage. Do that thing you did at the grass gym.\_

I tensed up, but nothing happened. The ringing didn't happen again.

\_Oh my god that's so scary. There could beâ€|ANYTHINGâ€|in that alley.\_

A thousand thoughts crossed my mind, from tentacle monsters, to flesh eating parasites, to zombies, or aliens, or anything that ever scared me. I whimpered quietly to myself.

I looked down, and noticed I was clutching my tail in fright.

\_Josh wouldn't have this problem. Wiggly, Skarr, Myst, Sandy, OR Static wouldn't have this problem. Why does it have to be me?\_

The ringing sound happened again, much more distinctly. I shied away from the alley.

\_Maybeâ€|maybe I could just go back, and tell them what I've heardâ€|\_

I took another step back. And another. I turned to go back to the PokÃ©mon center, but stopped, and looked back one final time.

\_â€|Don't go in there. Don't do it. Something's in there, SOMETHING was making that ringing sound. If you go in there, there is literally a 100% chance SOMETHING is there, waiting for you.\_

I closed my eyes, and ran in.

\_I'm going to die. Yup.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Total darkness. I breathed a steady flame before me, so I could see around myself. I was terrified, horrified, totally petrified with fear. I was hugging myself tightly, shaking as I walked further into the alleyway.<p>

And thenâ€|I reached the end. There was nothing here.

"That's it?" I said allowed. My arms fell to my sides, and I stopped shaking.

\_Thereâ€|there was nothing here!\_

I heard the ringing once more, and looked down. A small circular metal thing shook slightly. I pushed on it with my foot, and it made the same ringing sound.

\_What is this thing? Is it a PokÃ©mon?\_

I prodded it again, and it moves a little, revealing a bit of a passagewayâ€|straight down. I pushed it harder, but it was really heavy.

I bent down, and pushed it with all my strength. Slowly, it slid off the hole, or at least enough where I could fit. Fortunately there was a ladder. Intoâ€|the darkâ€|scaryâ€|forebodingâ€|hole.

\_Well, as long as my life is forfeit anywayâ€|\_

I crouched down, and placed a hesitant paw on the first rung. Finding it stable enough, I placed a foot on the second, and slowly inched the rest of my body on the ladder.

\_Okay, so we know you ARE going to dieâ€|\_

I climbed down the ladder, creeping down at a snail's pace.

\_But HOW exactly are you going to die?\_

I lost my footing, but was able to regain it quickly. I gulped, and shuddered at what could have happened.

\_Will it be quick?\_

I continued climbing down, trying not to cry in fear.

\_Or will it be slow and drawn out?\_

For some reason, I couldn't climb down anymore. I looked down, and I noticed the ladder had ended, and I was standing on the ground. I let go of the ladder, and turned around.

I could hearâ€|cheering. There was light, too. Hesitantly, I walked through the arch, into the strange, wide room.

\* \* \*

><p>(Overdose POV)<p>

I grabbed the back of Snivel's collar, and hoist him into the air, grinning the evil grin only the arena would allow. This was the moment I craved â€" the moment before the victory, where your opponent was completely at your mercy. The crowd roared in approval, and egged me on with shouts of 'Finish him!' and 'Kill him!' echoing through the air.

A small, fierce bass suddenly pumped into the arena, fueling me further with hatred. I flipped Snivel around, and caught him by the fur on his chest. He didn't look back, and instead looked dully at the ground.

"Still think you know me, you little piece of \_shit?\_" I whispered, growling into Snivel's ear.

"Iâ€|I don't know who you areâ€|" He hiccupped, trying to breathe normally.

"Damn right you don't." I threw him off me, and kicked him with both paws right in the gut. He flew a small ways before returning to the earth, no longer willing or able to shield himself from the impact. I calmly walked forward, and picked him back up. Snivel didn't resist, and gurgled something and I hoisted him back into the air.

"Finish him!" The crowd roared.

"Think I'll do it?" I grinned, forcing Snivel to look me in the eyes. He tried to escape my gaze, so I roughly twisted his neck, forcing him to match my eyes. "\_Do you\_!?"

He convulsed, and looked back at me with wide, terrified eyes.

"WHEN YOU DIEâ€|" I roared, exciting the crowd once more.

"I want you to know you failed. You didn't protect anyone back then, five long years ago. I'm still \_alive, \_Snivel. And guess what?"

He struggled to breathe in my grasp.

"It won't stop with you. I'll find the rest â€" I'll find all your friends, and bring them here too."

The fear in his eyes turned to anger, as he feebly resisted my grasp.

"And it won't stop with them either, you little bitch. Who do you care about most? A partner perhaps?"

He swung forward and tried to kick me, but I held him firmly in place.

"Who is it then?"

He growled, his fear replaced by wrath.

"Your trainer?"

A fist smashed into my eye, cloaked in dark energy. I stumbled back and tried to regain my footing just as another fist caught me in the jaw. Snivel raced at me again, surrounded in an aura of black energy. He bounded up with a combination of swirling darkness and electricity, and charged at me.

\_A second wind?\_

I caught him in midair, and introduced him back to the floor, with a satisfying crunch. He crawled back up, and I smashed him again with my foot.

"Yeaaaaah!" The crowd cheered in approval. "Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!" They chanted in unison, sending the echoes coursing through the arena's cavern.

"You're so uncreative!" I shouted back, momentarily stunning the audience. "How should I kill him!?"

"Break him!" Someone in the audience yelled.

"Bleed him!"

"Smear him on the floor!"

"I have a better idea." I growled, smiling to myself.



### 13. Through The Darkness

(Static POV)

Pain. I couldn't remember a time where I was rid of it. All I felt, everything I experienced was shrouded in a haze of agony. I couldn't stand. I couldn't move. I could barely breathe, and even then it was labored. Overdoseâ€|Roughâ€|he was going to kill me. This was how I died.

"Hey Snivel?" Overdose commanded.

I couldn't look up.

"You can't swim."

\_What?\_

"I remember throwing you into a lake, way back when. You sunk instantly, didn't you?"

\_Yâ€|yeah, I remember thatâ€|\_

"A PokÃ©mon that can't swim! I can't believe your kind still exists!"

\_That'sâ€|that's not true anymoreâ€|\_

"I'm going to watch you drown, Snivel!"

\_Joshâ€|\_

"Or better yet, I'm going to blast you into the sea!"

\_Josh taught me how to swimâ€|\_

"Hyper beam style!"

\_It was one of the first things we learned togetherâ€|\_

"Grab his paws!"

I felt myself being lifted by two opposing forces. I looked up meekly, to see Overdose standing in front of me. Two of the dark, gemstone PokÃ©mon were holding me in place.

\_Joshâ€|\_

I wanted to faint. I wanted to go unconscious, and have this pain all be over. I wanted to wake up, healed, and in Josh's arms. I didn't care about losing anymore; I just wanted to be homeâ€|

The lights in the cavern dulled, as I watched Overdose summon a large ball of light in his jaws. He turned to me and smiled, giving me one last look, full of unfiltered malice.

"I'll see you in hell, Snivel."

The white glow blasted into me, sending me soaring off into the sky.

The heat of the attack ignited my fur, and superheated my flesh. Pain. Everything I could ever experience was torture, and once again I was able to scream as I flew out of the cave, and towards the open ocean. I heard someone scream back from the cavern, as my smoking body flew outwards, towards the sea.

"STAATTIIIIIIIC!"

\* \* \*

><p><em>Is thisâ€|how flying PokÃ©mon see?<em>

I had been flying for almost five seconds. I spun lazily in the air, unable to control my body as the force from the blow slowly spun me around. As much as I loathed the thought, I forced myself to remain conscious.

I couldn't move. Josh taught me to swim, but what good was swimming when you had no paws you could use to swim with?

I began falling.

The foreboding night waters were still, giving no hint to what may lie underneath. I had no choice, and I knew crashing into even water from this height would hurt badly. I couldn't swim. I couldn't move, and I could barely breathe. One more second, and I would crash into the black, icy waters. I closed my eyes, and did the only thing I could do.

I held my breath.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>CRASH<strong>

I went under. The water was freezing, and the salt stung my eyes, but I firmly held my breath. I didn't know how deep I went, but I couldn't see the surface anymore. All I saw around me was blackness. There wasn't any hint of light, or any creature under the waves. Calling it like midnight would be a lie, or the color of ink, because we can see those colors, or lack thereof. This was different. This wasn't just black, it was the pure absence of color. There was nothing here. I couldn't swim, or cry, or call for help. I was trapped, inside the pure blackness of the waves.

I felt a tugging sensation as I was pulled in one direction. The sensation got stronger and stronger, until suddenly, I saw light once more. My body broke free of the water, and I gulped down the air that I could now breathe freely.

It was night. The sky was black, and the water was black. I could see the shore, but it was far awayâ€|maybe more than a mile. I couldn't swimâ€|

I didn't resist the water's influence as it pushed and pulled me across the waves. Dead Mon's float. It wasn't swimming, but it was the first technique Josh taught me about staying above the waves. I thought it was stupid at the time, but now, it was the only thing I could do.

\_I don't want to dieâ€|\_

I looked up at the night sky, and for once, maybe I saw what Josh always saw when he gazed at it. He would always describe it in such detail, like the glitter of the stars, and the cool light of the moon. I never appreciated it until now. I always thought giving such detail to nature was stupid and poetic, but now all I wanted was to be on that shore, in his arms, and have him tell me all about the stupid moon. I wanted to be safe, but I knew I could never make it back to shore. The current was pushing me more and more into the ocean, and with nothing left to do but float, I couldn't resist its influence.

\_Joshâ€|\_

\* \* \*

><p>How long had I floated on the water? It seemed like lifetimes; eternities of staring into the blurring stars. There were times where I felt like I was waking up, and there were times where I felt myself slipping away, but into sleep or death I didn't know. I woke up again, and with no other choice, continued looking up into the night sky.<p>

\_Thisâ€|this is how I die.\_

I gulped with the realization as a smooth wave lifted my body slightly, then lowered it once more. Even staying afloat required some amount of energy, and I knew I wasn't capable of it much longer. I took a deep breath, and shuddered.

\_I hopeâ€|I hope Josh'll be okay without me.\_

I sniffed, instantly regretting it as pain coursed through my face. I cringed instantly, and more pain tore apart my muscles. I lost my steadiness in my agony, and accidentally turned, losing my buoyancy. My head went under first, greeting me with the awful, drying, salty taste of the cruel, uncaring sea. I thrashed - losing precious moments of energy I couldn't spare â€" and finally righted myself once more, and took a breath of the sweet air.

\_Air I may not be able to taste soonâ€|\_

Careful this time not to snivel, I let a tear fall from my face, and land in the endless seas. It didn't matter. All I hoped was that Josh would be okay after I died. That he wouldn't blame himself or Skarr for my-

"Statgggulllllph!" A voice cried to my right, swallowing saltwater instead of finishing their cry. I carefully turned my head, but couldn't see anything in the endless black. I did hear coughing and splashing though, until finally I could make out what the voice was calling out.

"STAAATIC!"

In my haze, I couldn't tell who the voice belonged to; all I knew was that they were my friendâ€|and maybe I wouldn't die. They came over to me, but I still couldn't make out who they were. A strange, mystical light from somewhere illuminated the watersâ€|

"Static! Oh thank goodness. Grab my tail, and I'll swim us out of here. And can you keep my fire from touching the waves? You don't know how bad it burns!"

The voice washed over me, but I didn't quite understand the meaning behind it. Hesitantly, I grabbed an offered tail, mesmerized by the bright flame before me. The creature was orange and had a muscular tail, and had curved, angular features.

"Charmander?" I asked hesitantly, as he pulled me in a specific direction.

"Not anymore." The creature laughed, though I could tell he was quickly getting exhausted. Despite his fit appearance, it was likely he didn't swim often, being a fire type. The Pok mon drew another shaky breath, and continued his relentless pace across the waves.

"Nova?" I questioned, the current tugging me alongside him. "But  but you  you can't swim."

"I never said that." Nova responded. "I just said I was  " he trailed off.

"Afraid. You were afraid of the water."

Nova didn't speak for a while. A part of my mind was worried I offended him, but I couldn't hold on to the thought, and it slipped from my mind. After some time, I felt my grip begin to weaken, and I felt myself beginning to lose consciousness. I saw the Pok mon grab my collar, and hoist me on their back as they continued the voyage  

"I am afraid. I guess  I don't know. I knew I needed to do this to save you. I guess  some fears need to be faced."

  I woke up, and we were on a beach. There were buildings and bright lights, and pretty things. I wasn't walking  my feet weren't moving. Something was carrying me  I didn't know where we were going, but I wasn't scared. I trusted it  whatever it was. When my eyes closed again, I didn't fight it.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

"Josh, Pok mon are incredibly resilient. I'm not sure what happened, but I'm sure Static-

"Not now Sandy." I held up a shaky hand, and pressed it across my forehead. "J-just  not now."

We were in the emergency care unit of the Pok mon center. Sandy sat beside me, resting her head on my shoulders. Even if I didn't want to talk, she knew the small gesture would at least calm me down some amount.

To my right was Wiggly, who was being uncharacteristically quiet. She held a somber expression, and hugged herself with her tiny paws.

Skarr sat as a crumpled mess in the corner; his feathers unpreened, and his coat murky and unkempt. Nova laid beside me, wrapped in my jacket. Only moments earlier he had rushed Static to the Pokémon center. He was drenched with seawater, and barely had enough strength to hand Static over to the nurse before collapsing on the floor in exhaustion. I hadn't even had time to thank him; all I could do was cover him with my jacket as he slumbered beside me.

Static looked rough. They were stabilizing him now, and they told us that they would update us with results as soon as they had any new information.

I wanted to wake up Nova and ask him, but he was out cold. New information, while perhaps relieving me of some stress, wouldn't help Static right now. Instead, I laid a calming hand on the now Charameleon's back.

Some time passed, and Sandy placed her hand on my shoulder to get my attention.

"Josh. Let's get some rest, shall we? It's past midnight. We can get the information in the morning."

"You go. I'll carry Nova as well, and put him in my bed."

"No Josh. I won't be able to rest with you out here."

"And I won't be able to rest while Static's still—" I bit back what I was about to say. "Look. I won't be sleeping tonight. If you have a chance to rest, you should take it."

"And leave you out here alone?" Sandy looked at me with worried, forlorn eyes.

"I'm not alone." I motioned to Skarr.

"He's hardly suitable company, especially in a time like this! You need someone to talk to—or not talk to, if you prefer." Sandy pouted. "You need someone here."

"And I'll need someone tomorrow too." I looked up. Sandy visibly flinched when I made eye contact — maybe she hadn't expected to see my eyes? No doubt they were bloodshot. I probably looked terrible. "It won't be an admission of weakness to go to sleep. You're wrong — I don't need someone. I need you. But right now, nothing's happening. We'll get more information in the morning, and if things go badly—" I choked back a sob.

"Things won't go badly." Sandy whispered, putting a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

"—then I'll need you more than ever." I looked back at her, puffy-eyed and all. "And, I'll need to make sure you're \_awake.\_" I smiled meekly, poking her in the ribs. She smiled. "Because I certainly won't be."

"You promise you'll be okay for the night?" Sandy pleaded, one last time. I nodded. "Okay. I'll carry Nova to our room, and set him on the one Myst is taking up. Tell me if anything changes, okay?"

"Of course. Take care."

\_Take care? That wasâ€|an odd thing to say.\_

"Y-you too." Sandy carefully scooped Nova into her arms, wincing slightly at his new found weight. Noticing her discomfort, I fished the room key out of my pocket, and walked her to the door, where I pushed it open for her. After a muffled 'thanks' from Sandy, I made it back to the lobby, where Skarr still hadn't moved.

I walked over to where Skarr was lying and sat down next to him. Skarr looked up at me with wide, scared, guilt-ridden amber spheres that spoke the volumes he dared not to. I placed a hand on his metallic down, and rubbed it softly between my fingers.

[â€|You should hate me.] Skarr concluded, after a long silence.

[I don't blame you.] I responded. Static wasn't hurt because of him, it was some kind of outer influence; one I would learn about later when Nova or Static would wake up.

[You should.] Skarr sulked, placing his head on the smooth, marble floor.

[You couldn't have foreseen this.]

[No, but I \_could \_have seen Static, like you told me to.]

[Don't blame yourself for this.]

[I have to.] Skarr forced a grin, though I could tell it hurt him terribly. [No one else seems to be, for some reason.]

[Because it's not your fault.]

Skarr turned away, and resumed his silent ways. I leaned against the wall, trying to stay optimistic, but deep within my soul fearing for the worst. Static had been there for so much of my life. He was almost a part of who I was now, and losing him wouldâ€|

\_Losing himâ€|\_

I took a quick breath, and stood up. Skarr whipped his head around, giving me a questioning gaze, as if to ask why I was leaving.

[I'll be right back.] I assured him. He nodded in understanding, and slumped back to the floor. I turned, and walked down the dimly lit hallway.

\* \* \*

><p>I shuddered, and clutched the sink with a shaking hand. There were dark circles under my inflamed eyes, giving my normal cheery green eyes a haunted, sickly appearance. I cupped some water from the faucet into my mouth, to wash out the taste of bile.<p>

[Josh?] A hesitant thought prodded against my own from a consciousness outside the bathroom. I splashed my face with water, trying to get it to return to its normal color. [Josh, if I don't hear from you, I'm coming in there.]

[I'm fine, j-just give me a moment.] I barked.

\_Calm. You never snap at people. There is nothing to gain from being short tempered. You're going to go out there and apologize for that.\_

â€|\_after a moment.\_

I supported myself against the sink again, and sighed. I felt terrible.

\_I feel like I'm helping everyone else tonight. Why can't I get mad!? Why can't I be irrational, and get upset!? Skarr thinks I'm mad at him? I AM! This entire thing could have been avoided if he had just FUCKING listened! And Sandy! She knows I'm grieving, but she would rather lie in bed then-\_

\_Deep breath.\_

I realized I was crying again.

'\_You're being irrational.\_' A voice in my head spoke.

'\_NO SHIT.\_' Another one answered. '\_My best friend could DIE. He might already be DEAD.\_'

'\_Then that's when you need your friends.\_'

'\_S...s-shut up.\_'

My rational side was right, of course, but it didn't help matters. I coughed into the sink again, and rinsed out my mouth one final time before heading outside.

[Josh?] Skarr asked hesitantly. He was standing outside the bathroom, with a look of concern on his face. [Are you okay?]

As soon as the words left his mouth, he cringed expectantly. We both knew the answer. If my eyes didn't tell the story well enough, the smell of bile did. Skarr winced, ready for a fury of words asking how he could be so foolish to ask if 'I was okay'. I sighed, and slipped out a mint I got from the service desk.

[Yeah Skarr, I'm okay.]

I knew what he meant, of course. 'Okay' now had a new meaning. 'Okay' didn't mean everything was fine, or that I was happy. 'Okay' didn't mean that I wasn't crying, or throwing up in the bathroom sink. Okay now meant 'are you stable enough to be alone; are you safe? Are you a danger to yourself', which the answer was an uneasy yes. Skarr nodded, a guilty expression once again crossing his face.

[T-that was phrased poorly on my endâ€|] Skarr gulped, shrinking away.

[I knew what you meant. Want to go sit down again?]

[â€|Yes please.]

And we walked back to the lobby and sat, with fear and hope coursing through our thoughts like the wind on a stormy night...

\* \* \*

<p>"â€|jâ€|shâ€|jo...shâ€|Josh!"<p>

My eyes regained focus, and I looked up to see a concerned nurse eyeing me from across the room.

"I'm sorryâ€|" I sighed, and shook my head. "I didn't quite catch what you said."

"I said he's ready to see you."

"Static?" I breathed a sigh of relief, and bounced up from my seat.

"No, sir. Static's doctor."

"â€|Oh." I felt deflated. The happiness of the moment was stolen from me, and replaced by a similar hole that had slowly begun to drill its way into my hollow heart.

"Follow me." The nurse motioned.

We walked for a short time down a hall. Once we had walked for five minutes or so she stopped abruptly, and looked to the side. I matched her gaze, and noticed a large viewing window to my right. It appeared to be a surgeon's room filled with various types of medical equipment. A monitor display was present and giving signs of a weak yet beating heart. I hesitantly pressed closer to the glass. The patient was hooked into several different machines, with more than a dozen different cords flowing out of their body. The body was covered, and was far too small to be human.

A small yellow thunderbolt tail hung loosely to the side of the table. I closed my eyes, and focused on my breathing.

\_He's Static. Heâ€|he can make it through anything.\_

"This PokÃ©mon was beaten relentlessly, burned, mutilated, and mercilessly harmed." The nurse spoke in a low, monotone voice. She glanced in my direction with uncaring, cold, heartless eyes. "He never should have been able to withstand this abuse. How his body has held up this long is beyond me. He should have died a while ago." The nurse turned back to the window, and put her hand on the glass, as if to touch the sleeping Pikachu, or put a warm hand on the patient's shoulder. "From his wounds, I have no doubt that there were times he wished he could have died. Perhaps it would have even been for the better. I can't picture the kind of mental scarring someone would collect from this kind of abuse."

Her words made my insides rot, as if I was being slowly consumed from the inside.

"Câ€|can I s-see him?" I asked, on the verge of tears.

"Why would you want to see that Pikachu?" The nurse hissed with unprofessional scorn. "He's not yours."



"What!?"

"Your Pikachu is in one of the recovery rooms."

My sadness and guilt turned to anger, and I faced the nurse with teary, bloodshot eyes.

"Is this some kind of game to you!?"

"\_Game\_." The nurse turned away, and stared at the Pikachu beneath the sheet. "No, this is certainly no \_game \_to me, trainer. I hope it isn't to you either."

\_This nurse has wasted enough of my time.\_

"I want to see Static." I demanded.

"Funny; he wanted to see you as well. First thing he said. Not 'give me more morphine', not 'Why am I in the hospital', or even 'Thank you for saving me'."

"Where's his room?" I growled menacingly.

"Room 224. Find it yourself; I'm not walking you there." The nurse turned around, and walked away.

I pushed away my scorn for the nurse's actions and bolted down the hallway and up the stairs.

\_Static was awake!\_

The thought instantly calmed me, and released my tensed up muscles that I hadn't realized had been stressed for so long.

\_â€|He's alive. Staticâ€|Static's alive.\_

I choked back a happy sob. But noâ€"now wasn't the time for that.

\_First, I need to see him. First I need to make sure it's HIM, make sure he's okay, and make sure he's not hurt anymore.\_

\_Room 224. Here.\_

I swung open the door, and saw Static lying in bed. He was half covered in the sheets, but from what I could tell, he looked surprisingly good. There was a bandage wrapped around his forehead, and a sling around his waist, but he looked healthy and vibrant. Upon seeing me, he jolted forward, but some kind of restraining device held him in place. His eyes were as big as I had ever seen them, with a mixture of relief and pure joy.

[JOSH!]

[Static!]

I ran forward, and hugged him as gingerly as I could, careful not to aggravate the injuries to his side. He however didn't have any reservations, and squeezed me as tightly as his little paws could.

I noticed he was crying. He didn't let go, and held me with all of his might. All I heard was a small sniffing sound, mixed with the quiet hiccup of a sob.

[I thoughâ€|I thought I wouldn't wake up, Joshâ€|] Static whimpered, clutching my sides as he shook.

[You're here now, Static, and you're okay. You're okay now.]

After a few moments, he calmed down, and released me from his miniature grip. He instantly wiped his eyes â€" hurt or not, Static wasn't one to openly show emotion. This small, perhaps childish act reassured me. No matter what had happened, Static was still himself, even if he was shaken.

[Can you talk about it?] I asked, sitting on the bedside next to Static. I noticed his left paw was cuffed to the bed, and the resulting skin around static's arm was an agitated red.

\_Why would they cuff him to the bed? Was he on some kind of dangerous medication that made him unstable?\_

[Y-yeah.] Static sighed, and nodded slowly. [Butâ€|it's hard to tell. Can we bring everyone here first? I don'tâ€|I don't want to tell it more than once.]

[Of course. Let's wait some time though; I think the others are sleeping right now. I know I could certainly use some restâ€|]

[Me too, I feel like gar-] The word Static was about to use was lost, as tears welled up in his eyes once more. [H-hey Josh, um, c-could youâ€|sleep here? J-just for tonightâ€|] Static shivered.

[Of course.] I got up and turned off the lights, then flopped on the mattress next to Static. He curled up by my side as much as he could â€" the restraint seemed to be digging into his arm quite a bit. Thinking quickly, I got out a small Swiss-Army knife from my pack, and dug at the lock mechanism for a moment. After a second or two, I finally disabled the device with a satisfying 'pop'. Static rubbed his paw appreciatively, but looked at me confusion.

[Youâ€|you broke it.] He concluded sleepily, starting into my eyes with concern.

[I fixed it.] I smiled. He grinned, and curled up against me. I sighed one final time for the night; one final, contented, sigh.

\_Static was safeâ€|\_

\* \* \*

><p>[â€|and his tail smashed into me, like, really hard.] Static continued his tale. I stood by his bed listening intently, trying to push away my spite for Rough, or Overdose now, as he preferred. I would let him finish his story, but immediately after I would report this to the authorities. This kind of set-up was inexcusable, and I shuddered to think about the amount of PokÃ©mon that had lost their lives to this type of abuse. The only thing that kept me rooted in

place was the fact that Static needed me right now.<p>

Static continued talking, occasionally getting lost in the competitive aspects of the battle, but then finding himself again, and shuddering about the whole experience. I didn't know what drug they had injected him with, but once again, this was a question for a later point.

Static stopped for a moment. [Josh?]

[Yes, Static?]

]Um, can I have a cup of water?]

I bit my tongue. Even if just for a second, Static was beginning to sound like Nova. It wasn't like him. He was never timid, or at least, hadn't been in years. Overconfident and perhaps proud â€" never skittish. What Overdose did to him shook something inside Static pretty hard to bring this side of himself to the surface.

[Sure, bud.] I stood up, and got a water bottle from one of my bags. Finding it empty, I left the room in search for a water fountain. Upon walking out the door, I nearly bumped into the same nurse from before.

"Excuse-" My mind automatically began apologizing for the slight social violation before I saw who I was addressing, and how disturbingly close she was to the door. "â€|were you eavesdropping on us?"

"As if you didn't realize that." The nurse scowled.

I gave her a disbelieving look before turning my back to find the fountain.

"I'm not done talking with you." She spat.

"Do you have news about Static's condition?"

"No."

"Well, then I'm done talking with you." I ground my teeth and continued to walk. She jogged to catch up to me, and turned to me with an angry glare.

"So, how much of that was rehearsed?"

"Excuse me?" Perhaps it was my lack of sleep, or all the stress I had been under, but I was beginning to notice my near-limitless patience for others was draining dangerously thin.

"You know, the whole 'captured' storyline your Pikachu gave. It was quite endearing; him playing the part of the victim, and your other PokÃ©mon â€" Nova was it? That went and swam two miles to rescue him. Truly touching, if it weren't all a lie."

I turned sharply, and took a deep breath to steady myself. "My PokÃ©mon aren't telling lies."

"And yourself! Perhaps the best actor of them all." The nurse took a

step closer, and jabbed a finger into my chest. "Tearing up at his story, and staying with him as he slept, instead of going to your room. You cover your tracks well."

"What do you want?" I looked at her with angry incredulity.

"Nothing." She shrugged, suddenly complacent. "Why would I want anything? Well, I do need one thing. Now that your Pikachu is healthy, you need to leave. Now."

"What is your definition of 'healthy'? He's in more than one cast, and clearly needs bed rest!" I noticed my voice growing in volume, and made a mental note to calm down. I felt my pulse begin to quicken.

"Doesn't matter. He'll live, and that's all I'm obligated to do. We need the room."

"You do NOT!" I shouted, then quickly steadied myself. "You have dozens of open rooms!"

"Those are for other patients."

"They're unfilled! Aggravation of his injuries could take months to heal, if at all!"

"That isn't my concern, trainer. Get him out of the room."

Unintentionally, I looked the nurse up and down. It was instinctual; some kind of primitive chemical instinct that triggered before a conflict. She was average height but thin – weak around her upper body, with little muscle to support her frame. I clenched my fist, and stood firm.

"I won't let you." I said simply. My breath quickened and my pulse began to race. I had never felt like this before – adrenaline spikes sure, but this was different. I felt angry. Not upset, not disappointed, pure, undiluted anger. The rational part of my mind was screaming at me to get away from this situation before I did something I regretted, but the other side knew I needed to stay and hold my ground.

"Oh? You think you intimidate me, trainer?" The nurse cooed, leaning against the wall.

The last rational point of my mind relinquished its control. I dashed at her, and smashed my fist into the wall next to her face. The wall tore open, releasing a spray of dried paint and drywall. I removed my fist from the wall, and gave her the most intense glare I was capable of giving. Her smirk was erased as her eyes widened in fear.

"\*\*\_Yes.\_\*\*" I growled in a voice that I had never used before. "\*\*\_I think I 'intimidate' you.\_\*\* Now let's get something clear. You will \*\*\_not\_\*\* be releasing my Pokémon until he is fully healed. I don't know who you are or how you even became certified to become a nurse with your attitude, but I \*\*\_swear\_\*\*, with every fiber of my being, if you hurt him I will \*\*\_break you\_\*\*."

She struggled against my grip. I didn't realize I had grabbed the collar of her shirt in my rage. I released it, never breaking my glare from her eyes. She looked back, terrified yet confused.

"You care about him?" She mumbled back, looking at me with bewilderment.

"Of course I care about him!" I yelled. "He's my best friend!"

The nurse went quiet for a moment, and stared at the floor. When her gaze turned back to my eyes, she looked different. Not jaded and cruel like before, but meek, and almost

broken.

"Do you know what Pokerus is?" She asked, with a hint of a quiver in her voice.

"No?" I felt myself calm somewhat, and my head begin to clear. "Is it some kind of medicine?"

"Hardly." She sighed, and rubbed her forehead. She couldn't have been more than thirty, but suddenly she seemed much older. The cruelty in her eyes was replaced by a look of pain.

"What is it then?"

"A drug. Well, Pokerus isn't just in itself, but mixed with other chemicals it is."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Traces of Pokerus were found in your Pikachu. Static, is it? That indicated he had taken the drug in the last few hours."

"I wouldn't say 'taken', I would say 'was injected with'." I felt a bit of my anger return.

"My apologies." She took a step back, and bowed her head.

"What does this drug do?"

"Causes selective muscle degeneration, bone decay, skin discoloration, nausea, cancer." She began listing off the side effects. After a moment she stopped. "But most of all, it prevents Pokémon from fainting."

I blinked. "What? So what, they just become invulnerable?"

"No. They're just capable of fighting to the death."

I took a breath, and began processing what I had learned. A piece of an unfinished puzzle tore at me like a hangnail, frustrating me until finally the pieces snapped together.

"That Pikachu, in surgery. He's yours, isn't he?" I stated firmly. After a moment I realized what I said was rather blunt, but I didn't care. She looked back at me, and shuddered.

"Actually, no." The nurse shook her head. "I would never have been part of that arena."

"If you knew about the arena's existence, why haven't you alerted the authorities!?" I demanded.

She bit her lip, and I noticed tears beginning to form on the edge of her eyes.

"Were you paid!?" I demanded, taking a step closer to her. She shook her head. "Does the law enforcement already know, and are corrupt?" Once more, she shook her head. "Then what? Why haven't you told anyone?"

"B-because they'llâ€|they'll kill her." The nurse broke down completely, sobbing in the hallway. I was slightly taken aback by her extreme show of emotion.

"Who? Who will they kill?"

"C-Charity. My Blissey." She choked.

Now the pieces slid together. I still didn't know how the Pikachu downstairs played a role in any of this, but I had more information.

"You found out, and they took her, and threatened you with her death if you spoke out." I concluded. She nodded timidly, tears rolling down her face. "You thought I was with them. You thought I did this to my Pikachu on purpose, and expected your help, despite what 'we' did to you." Another nod. I offered her my hand.

"What are you doing?" She asked, starting at my hand inquisitively.

"Helping you up. We're going back to the room, and we're going to figure this out. Come on." I lifted her to her feet, and we ran back to the room.

#### 14. A minor case of shock

Everyone looked up when I came back to the room. Static gave me a quick look of confusion at the empty water bottle in my hand, but then a knowing glance once he saw the determination in my eyes. I turned to everyone, and took a quick breath.

[The worst may not be over for us all.] I announced. [A Blissey is trapped down there, possibly being forced to fight like Static. I'm going to go down there and rescue her. It's early in the day, and it's not likely-]

[BULLSHIT!] Sandy shouted. [You're not going down there! Josh, you've hardly slept, and you couldn't stand in a fight against a PokÃ©mon! Especially these; they're trained killers!]

[I'll go.] Static nodded, and tried to shift out of bed.

[You will NOT!] Sandy shouted. [You're in multiple casts, and you're

terribly weakened!] I made a motion to move. [Neither can you Josh! You're both being ridiculous!] Sandy snapped at us.

[Let me go.] Myst said quietly.

[No.] I said instinctively. [It's not-]

[Josh. Think for a moment. Who else can get in there stealthily? For you it's a matter of luck; hoping no one will be there. For me, it's a matter of skill. I take the form of a commoner in the arena, find the Blisse, and return. If I am spotted, I simply change forms until I am not recognized. Simple.]

I opened my mouth to object, but I couldn't find a reasonable objection.

[Tell me where to go, and I'll go now.] Myst nodded.

[Myst, I can't send you out there after what happened to Static. I don't trust this with anyone but myself. If something happened to you-]

[-Which is why I don't plan on something happening to me.] Myst stated firmly.

[Are you sure about this Myst?] Sandy asked. Myst nodded.

[No!] I shouted. [I don't give her permission. I'm her trainer, and-]

[You're also not in the right frame of mind.] Sandy said calmly. My mind burned with the anger from before, but the rational portion of my mind won me over, and I sat down and began evaluating my behavior. Had I been reckless? I started feeling numb.

[Alright. Let's start planning then. Wiggly, you know where Static traveled, right? You can get there?]

[Yes!] Wiggly nodded.

[Good. Lead Myst there. Wait for her outside, and alert ANYONE at any sign of trouble. Stay safe. Actually, better yet, I'm going with you. Safety in crowds. Nova, you're also coming with us. You got a good view of the arena, and you're going to describe it to Myst as we walk. Once we get there, we'll be standing right outside, as inconspicuously as possible.]

[It's actually below the city.] Nova pointed out. [We would have to stand in the alley, while Myst traveled down.]

[Very well. Myst, you'll scream as loud as you can if the situation gets out of control, and two of us will come down while the third alerts the police. We should resist alerting the police for now, in case anyone from the arena catches wind of it, and decides to honor their agreement with the nurse. Everyone ready? Let's go.] Sandy nodded fiercely, as if she had done this a thousand times. Her eyes were dedicated and demanded respect and loyalty. My Pokémon were obedient and efficient in her hands.

No wonder she had become a Master so quickly.

They left, and the numbing feeling continued to grow. I felt powerless. Sandy had made a wise choice in cutting me off from the plans. As much as I loathed the thought, I was the weakest link here. Even if Static was brought along, he could hold his own despite his injuries. He would hurt himself of course, but he would be better in a fight than a human. The only thing I could do was yell for help.

\_â€|yell for helpâ€|\_

The thought left a bitter taste in my mind. I waited a few minutes after Sandy and the rest had left, and turned to Static. He was resting quietly on the bed, even breaths exiting his small, weakened frame.

\_Good.\_

I turned to Skarr. Like I presumed, he was a mess. An outer expression of inner turmoil. I realized I probably didn't look much better, but I paid the thought little mind.

[Skarr!] I thought roughly, in a commanding voice. Skarr's head shot up at attention, despite his gaunt, haunted appearance. I didn't use this tone often, but when I did, I expected to be obeyed. [I need to leave. Now. I need you to look after Static, and ensure his safety while I'm gone.]

Skarr bent his neck meekly. Now that I could see his frame, I saw how disheveled he really was. Although I got some semblance of sleep last night, it was likely he didn't gain any at all. His eyes softened at my request, and cringed with guilt.

[You would trust me? With his care?] Skarr whispered in quiet disbelief.

[I would trust you, because I know you will not fail.] I stated. Saying such things left a terrible taste in my mouth. I was very empathetic by nature, and I realized the implications of what I was saying. Although on the outside it may have appeared I was only saying I had confidence in him, there was a darker, implied notion. The words 'this time' haunted after my phrase, though I choice to not wield them. It wasn't necessary; I knew he still felt their weight.

[I won't.] He nodded gravely. I turned swiftly and left the hospital.

\* \* \*

><p>(Overdose POV)<p>

The sun burned against my eyes. How long had it been since I had the displeasure of being conscious during the day? I loathed it. I loathed the sun, the bright sky, and the soft grass beneath my feet. Most of all though, I loathed the people I passed, humans and PokÃ©mon alike. Their smiles scorched into me more than the abysmal sun, each of them reminding me that they knew nothing of the world underneath them.



The Arena.

That was why I hated the Overworld. My feet could no longer feel the touch of the grass, for they had hardened with the time only stepping on sharpened rocks and concrete. My skin would scorch quickly from the introduction to the sun that I had so long forgotten, and the sky was not the unfeeling, cold black night I had come to know.

I kept my head down, and walked briskly to my location. Unfortunately, my form caught the eye of a gaudy, snobbish rich human woman. In seeing me, she held her hand over dramatically to her mouth, and gasped lightly.

[Oh my!] She thought only to me. [Honey, are you alright? You look dreadful. Are you hurt?]

\_Bitch, you don't know the meaning of pain.\_

[I bit, miss. I'm actually on my way to the Pok  mon center now. Could you possibly point me in the right direction?]

\_No reason to be rude, of course.\_

[Over that way   " would you like me to walk you there? You almost look like you were beaten! Are you sure you're alright? I've seen enough Pok  mon to know when they're hurt.]

\_You think you know me? Come down to the Arena, and I'll give you a taste of what I am.\_

[No thank you.] I nodded curtly. [Trust me. This is mostly from a birth defect. I'm mostly going for a check-up, to ensure my symptoms haven't gotten worse.]

\_Eat my lies, you ignorant piece of shit.\_

[Oh, well, if you're sure, honey. Be safe, alright?]

[I will.]

\_Idiot.\_

\* \* \*

><p>The automatic whoosh of the Pok  center doors greeted me as I stepped inside. The receptionist looked up when I walked in, and his eyes went wide.<p>

[D-do you want me to call the nurse!?] He yelped, surprised. Interesting. He must be new. Usually when doctors saw me they wouldn't bother to ask, and they would just attempt to grab me instead, and force me into a room. It's a mistake they would only make once, but even so I expected it. His inexperience would make my lie easier.

[No thank you, sir. I just have a rare condition, but I assure you I've had my monthly checkup. I'm actually here for a friend.]

[Oh.] The receptionist relaxed somewhat. [Do you know what room he's in?]

[Yes.] I lied.

[Okay. Do come back if you're experiencing any discomfort, alright?]

[Of course.] I smiled back, my lies whitening my sharpened teeth. I turned and walked down the hallway, careful to walk at a calm, yet quickened pace.

\_He would be alive. Of course he would be alive.\_

I peeked in the windows of every room, hoping to catch a glimpse of the elusive Pikachu. Growling to myself, I moved silently from room to room. This would take hours. I half considered going back to the receptionist and asking for his room, but that would begin to unravel my carefully constructed web of fallacies. No, I would bear my inconvenience with my stubborn guile, even if I had to search every damned room.

\* \* \*

><p>Finally. You'd think I would have found him quicker, considering his room was ten times larger than the others, and had a giant windowpane looking into it. After making sure no one was inside, I picked the door's lock, and strolled within. He was a wreck. I knew pain, and I knew the agony he must have undergone to achieve the types of medication he was getting. He had multiple bags hooked into him, and machines at both sides, displaying strange symbols. His breath shallowly rose and fell, like the falling of the last leaf on a tree before winter.<p>

My paw inadvertently kicked some piece of metal connected to a machine. I cringed at the unexpected noise, loathing giving away my stealth. Suddenly, he stopped breathing.

His chest gave way to a heavy sigh, and he suddenly shifted positions, sitting upright in bed. His eyes creased open, and a monitor to his side began to beep with an increased frequency.

"â€|Overdose." He said simply, smiling a weak smile. "Aren't you a sight for sore eyes?"

"Welcome back to the land of the living." I spat.

"You seem upset, Dosey. Lose a bet?"

"I almost lost-"

\_I almost lost a friend.\_

I held my tongue. "-lost track of the fact that you're an idiot."

"Auuugh, but you should have \_seen \_it 'Dose!"

"I did. I was there." I growled.

"No. \_SEEN \_it. You saw it, but you didn't \_see \_it, man." The

Pikachu's eyes went wide as he grasped at something invisible. "I could feel it. The waves in my hand. I could taste it. I swear, one more dose and I could have summoned it. Think of it â€" a Pikachu using Hydro Pump. Never been done before! I would have been the first. Ever! I was so close." The Pikachu slumped back into bed, with a dreamy expression crossing his face.

"It's not worth you getting killed."

"Psssssssssh!" The Pikachu laughed. "Dosey, you know we're invincible. Death can't even touch us."

"Don't call me that, Volt." I ordered. Volt grinned, and then looked at my face. His smile turned to one of bewilderment, before he caught himself, and gave me a smirk.

"Oh? Was the big bad Overdose worried about me?"

"You almost died. You're lucky I got you here in time." I hissed.

"\_Almost \_died." Volt rolled his eyes. "Everyone \_almost \_dies. We â€" you and me, 'Dose â€" we're always fine. We're the ones to stare Death in the face, and watch him blink."

"What are you going to do next time, Hmm? What if I wasn't there to pick you up, and rush you here? The Arena sure as hell wouldn't have saved you. You look like hell, Volt. This is the third time this year, and your body can't keep this up."

"That's rich, coming from you." Volt hissed in turn.

"Excuse me?"

"At least I wear my pain on the outside, 'Dose. Where's yours, hmmm? I have broken bones, torn skin. Where is your pain, 'Overdose'? Where do you store all your hurt?"

If he was anyone else, I would have broken him right there.

"\_Listen.\_" I growled dangerously close to Volt. "You don't know me. You don't know my story, or my pain. You don't know what I've gone through-

"Don't give me that emotional shit, 'Dose. We're not girls. I mean your \_insides, \_man."

His explanation caught me off guard. "What?"

"Your insides, 'Dose. Where do you think all that shit you put in yourself goes, man? It's a devil's deal. I only take one dose before my fights, and I only fight like once or twice a week. You fightâ€|damn. How much DO you fight?"

"Most nights, and I go a few rounds." I admitted, shrugging casually.

Volt shook his head. "A few rounds. And you're so nonchalant about it. Most only do one, maybe two a week. You go nearly every night,

for multiple fights. And I've seen them dose you. I only take one, you take like three!"

\_Five. I take five now.\_

"And," he continued, "where do you think all that goes? I break limbs. I tear my skin. I bleed. Where is your pain? It's on your insides, man. Your organs. Your skin shows it. Show me a Raichu that color of gray. You're not silver, 'Dose. You're \_gray. \_People stop you and ask if your sick man, and that's 'cause you \_are. \_But you got the kinda sick they can't heal. You keep this up and you're just gonnaâ€¦" Volt shook his head, unsure of how to continue.

"Hah." I scoffed. "So you're lecturing me now. The one that almost died. The one who's blood I washed out of my coat a week ago."

"I'm just saying, man. I'm still yellow."

"Raichu are \_naturally \_orange gray, you idiot. Just because I'm a bit more gray-"

"Raichu are DARK orange. Not orange gray, not even a hint of gray. And you're more than a bit gray 'Dose! You might as well be the color itself! You're sick, man. You're sick."

"I don't need the drug idled mind of a lunatic making my life choices." I rolled my eyes, and prepared to leave.

"Drug idled! That's a bit hypocritical!" Volt shouted as I left the room. "Your namesake is DRUGS, '\_Overdose\_'" Volt yelled into the hallway. "It's not a joke anymore, it's a warning. You take more than anyone else! One day your body won't be able to take it, and then you really will live up to your name!"

I ignored him, and kept walking.

\* \* \*

><p>As I walked down the hallway, I noticed myself continuing to check in the rooms. It was partially a nervous tick, and partially a habit due to all the time it took to find Volt's room. After the third time I tried to stop myself, but after the seventh I stopped caring. Soon I would be back home, in the darkness that I knew as my closest friend. The sweet embrace of-<p>

I stopped suddenly, and backpedalled. The person in the room I just inadvertently peeked into sparked some ancient memory in the back of my mindâ€¦

â€¦mixed with a not-so ancient memory of last night.

I took a step back, and looked through the window once more. My eyes didn't deceive me; Snivel was sleeping soundly on a bed inside the room.

\_I killed you. You can't swim. Even if you could, I broke your ribs and your arms. Maybe not your skull, but if I didn't I came damn close. How the hell are you alive?\_

I quickly searched the room to make sure he was alone. To my

surprise, he was. No one sat guarding him, and no nurse or doctor waited on him. Perfect. People couldn't get wind that he survived, of course. It would ruin my reputation. And, on a more personal note, Snivel put me into this mess.

\_Then shouldn't I be thanking him? I love the Arena, after all. It's cruelty is what I am.\_

No, I wouldn't thank him. The Arena was what I loved, yet it was a bittersweet thing. It stirred inside me like a temptress, hurting me and loving me with every movement. Yes, there was more love than loathing, but he still needed to pay for the pain he forced upon me.

\_But I won't make it theatrical like yesterday. He's sleeping. I sneak in, break his neck, walk out. Painless.\_

Nodding at my plan, I placed a paw on the doorknob, twisting it silently as to not disturb him.

Pain erupted in my temple, throwing the entire world into disarray. Colors swirled around me, and the shapes I had known became meaningless spinning colors. I tried to catch myself, but the smooth floor provided no traction, and I slid gracelessly across the turquoise tiles.

I blinked in rapid succession. The walls blurred, but they appeared. Quickly the world came back into focus, and I sprang up on my feet in one swift motion. What attacked me!?

It was silver. Not a punch or a kick either " it was far too precise. All the pressure of the blow was directed to a single point on my head, not diffused as if it was by a punch or kick. I growled to myself. I didn't like getting into fights dry. Now I fought with doses. Fighting without my usual substance made me feel lethargic and slow.

I looked up. A human stood a few yards away, wielding some kind of crude metallic rod, with an odd blunted head. The human stood tall, perhaps six feet in height. He was male and light skinned, with fierce orange hair. He was a trainer, and had multiple Pok  balls strapped to a belt that was nearly hidden by a red jacket. He looked unwell. His eyes were dark, and looked at me with an intensity I knew far too well.

I twisted my tail and smashed it against the floor, denting it, and sending a spray of sparks into the air. [To what do I owe the pleasure, \_human?\_]

[Cut the shit, Overdose. Why are you here?]

\_My reputation precedes me!\_

[To see a friend.] I almost laughed. That might have been the first true thing I had said since I had awoken this morning, yet it still came out as a lie, and a threat at that.

[Static is no friend of yours.] The Trainer positioned the metal rod at a threatening angle.

[Static?] I questioned. [Oh, you mean the Pikachu resting in that room? I should have pictured Snivel would have picked up a new name by now. You're his trainer then, I presume?]

[You presume correctly.] The Trainer hissed. I began circling him slowly, sizing him up.

[And you swam all that way to rescue your Pikachu, hmmm? You must be very dedicatedâ€|and very tiredâ€|] I trailed off, letting the implications imply themselves.

[I'm going to give you two options.] He spoke harshly.

[Oh? Do tell.]

[You can surrender. Go and have one of the nurses restrain you to the beds. They'll heal you to the best of their ability, but afterwards, you'll have to pay for the crimes you've committed.]

[That doesn't sound too appealing.] I smirked. [What's my other option?]

[That, or I kill you.] The trainer gripped his weapon with both hands. I sneered.

[You assume you could kill me?] I laughed openly. [Tell me, how would you do it, hmmm? You already got one shot on me, and for that I commend you.] I grinned. [But now that you don't have surprise on your side, how will you do it?]

The trainer faltered.

[Exactly. Even if you were a match for me, you don't have the eyes of a killer. Even if you were more than a match for me, you couldn't do it.] I taunted.

[I'm not in the best frame of mind, and you are directly responsible for putting my best friend in the emergency room, with the intent to kill him. Making the assumption that I couldn't kill you right now is a dangerous gamble.] He retorted.

[Your pathetic species couldn't fight off a normal Raichu, let alone one bred and trained to kill. Don't worry though.] I cooed. [I won't kill you. Too much attention. But I will electrocute you strong enough to give you minor brain damage, and knock you out awhile. While you're out, I'll kill your Pikachu, and no one will be the wiser. Except you, and you'll be half-brain-dead, and the nurse, which we already have under control.]

[Then all that's standing in your way is me.] He snarled, positioning his metal stick between us.

[You've already lost, idiot.] I smirked condescendingly, and raised my tail, lightly brushing the top of the metal pole the trainer was holding. [Goodnight.]

I grinned, waiting for the instantaneous transfer of over ten thousand volts of electricity to rush into the trainer's body. He convulsed once, jolting backwards, before darting forwards and smashing me with the rod again. I didn't have time to question how he

was still breathing before the third hit came, and rendered me blind and deaf to the world.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

Eight dollars. That's all my life was worth right now, a freaking eight dollars. Eight. In my sleep deprived state, I almost didn't buy them.

\_Almost.\_

Eight dollar rubber gloves. I knew I needed them, just in case, but for eight dollars I almost turned it down. Who charges eight dollars for gloves?

Of course, if I had known they would have saved me from permanent brain damage and/or death, I would have paid the cashier gladly. Maybe I would've even tipped.

Overdose lay against the wall, bleeding red ooze onto the floor below. I leaned against the same wall I had punched a hole into this morning, and panted. I could have just died. I could have become a vegetable, or at best, a shadow of whom I once was. I owed my life to a pair of overpriced gloves. Freaking eight dollar gloves.

\_Hellâ€|\_

Overdose took a breath. I raised my golf-club to finish the jobâ€|

â€|but lowered it. I wasn't a killer, he was right. Maybe in the heat of the moment, if Static's life were truly in danger, but even then it would have rotted against my consciousness for the rest of my days. No. I would get the nurses help to restrain him. They could heal him if they wished, just as long as he stayed put.

I looked him over more closely. He was out cold. It would be easy work putting him in a bed, and checking his vitals.

I turned to put away my gloves, and saw a horrified nurse standing behind me. Her face was completely pale, and her entire body was shaking. She was \_not \_the nurse from before.

I realized how I looked. I was standing over an unconscious, possibly dead PokÃ©mon with a bloody club raised above my head, in a striking motion. I probably looked like a lunatic.

"Heeeeyâ€|" I whispered calmly, setting down my club. "Alright, give me a second to explain-"

There are two very different screams a human can produce. One is common. It's either a yell, or a shout. The second type is hard to summon, if you're trying to fake it; it's an animalistic cry for help that is reserved only for the most dire of circumstances. It's the sound of someone being torn apart, or being attacked in the worst possible way.

Her scream was the second kind. It sent shivers down my spine and she screamed and raced off in the other direction as fast as she could.

\_Well. That could have gone better.\_

I looked down at the unconscious Raichu, and back to my bloody golf-club.

\_This doesn't look incriminating at all.\_

Within seconds, thundering sound of heavy footsteps filled the hallway. Officers of all types stormed inside, each carrying a heavy looking gun, and body armor.

\_How'd they get up here so fast?\_

"Freeze, and drop your weapon!" One of the ones in the back shouted into a microphone.

\_Why was I still holding this?\_

"Sure, um, yeah. I surrender." I mumbled, and dropped the golf-club. The guards looked a bit confused at my gesture. I grinned sheepishly, and held my arms at the appropriate angle for them to cuff me.

One of the younger officers walked hesitantly up to me, and cuffed me. I didn't resist. She looked inquisitively at me, and I grinned shyly.

"Are you alright in the head?"

"No." I confessed. "I'm probably in shock."

She looked inquisitively at me. "Are you dangerous?"

I thought for a moment. "No, I don't think so."

"Okay." She nodded. "I'm going to take you to the station, alright?"

"Sure, but can you wait a moment? I think I'm going to throw up first."

She winced. "Alright."

I took a step back and vomited, then vomited again, slipped in it, vomited once more, then fainted.

## 15. Lonely Keys

(Myst POV)

I took a deep breath of the dank, cellar air. Home. The shadows; finally a place where I felt I belonged. I no longer was black fox standing in a sea of white, no. Now, I was with company. I could blend in, and be whomever my I pleased. I would fit in, for once in a painfully long time.



What would be my mask today? Who would I wear as my disguise, and whose part should I act?

A Weavile. He " for this character would be a male " is an accomplice from a faraway land. He heard about this arena from a 'mutual friend', and wanted to see it in action. He had some cash on him, so he might place a bet or two. His REAL reason for visiting however, was much darker|

I took a deep breath, and got into character. My mirage instantly swirled around me, and mimicked a Weavile climbing down the ladder with ease, while I on the other hand had a much harder time. With only four legs and no real hands, this was proving both a slow and dangerous task. Also, the ladder tasted disgusting.

Finally, I reached the bottom, and strolled into the lights of the Arena. It looked very much like Nova had described. Two large circles wrapped around the sides. The inner circle housed the true arena, where a Gengar and a Larvitar fought for supremacy. In the outer, a large crowd sat in makeshift seats, cheering on the bloody conflict. In the back, a small metal door housed secrets. I didn't see the Blissys at first, and made a quick and reasonable assumption that she was hidden behind those doors, along with many other secrets|

\_Pay attention. You're only objective here is Blissys. Ignore the other treasures, and focus on her.\_

I casually walked to the back, aware of the two Sableye guarding the door. They turned to me and gave me a strange, alien look.

"Greetings." My illusion bowed, and I adopted a lower, more masculine tone.

"Greetings." The pair said in unison. "Enjoying the show?"

"Alas, my curiosity has gotten the best of me. My|friends tell me the Arena has the best entertainment in the area, yet I find myself drawn to this door instead. Might you sate my wonder?"

The gems on the Sableye sparkled. "You see. Not many do. The door is hidden to all but those that see. To them it appears as stone."

\_Shit, I didn't even realize this door was guarded by an illusion. Play this off!\_

"I've learned many talents in my life. One is seeing though falsehood." My illusion smirked, while I sat quietly within. It occurred to me that they might be able to see me as well. Even so, a Zorua here wouldn't be a cause of alarm. As much as I loathed admitting, most PokÃ©mon here were dark, poison, and ghost types. Not all of course, but enough to make my teeth grind.

"Seeing though falsehood is an interesting talent to have, sir|?"

"Sunbane." I responded.

\_Sunbane!? Could you BE more obvious?\_

"Sir Sunbane, yes." The two Sableye looked at each other, as if communicating without words. Their syncrasy unnerved me, and made me wonder if they were the same creature. "You wish to uncover mysteries, yes. That is a dangerous way to live, for not all mysteries reveal themselves so easilyâ€|what shall you do to earn your entrance to this passage?"

"There are several at my disposal, of course." I purred, as my mind raced. What would they want? "I have gold, of course-"

"Gold!" They scoffed.

"-but yes, the Sableye have little need for trinkets." I finished. They eyed me with interest, or at least LOOKED like they were eyeing me with interest. With the Sableye it's always hard to tell. "Of course, with gold you could buy gems."

"With enough." One of them shrugged. The other looked horrified that he had spoken out of turn, and swiped at the other. The other took the blow without complaint, and shook his head. They resumed their mutual tones. "But it is easier to find them ourselves. What you call gems, we call food. Gems have no more value than a simple loaf to us."

"Well. Perhaps you are less materialistic. Perhaps you crave what I crave; not gold or food, but information."

Their eyes twinkled again. Perfect.

"You think you have secrets to sate the wonderlust of a Sableye? We are timeless, and eternal. We know all that roams this earth. You think you have some knowledge that we do not possess?"

"Information I alone hold. It would not be possible for you to possess, unless I were to tell you."

They looked at each other, and I could feel curiosity against my own.

"The price of this information, sir Sunbane?"

"Entrance to this door."

"First your secret, then the door."

I smirked. "As a fellow creature of the night, I think it foolish to reveal my goods before you should reveal yours. Too long have I been victim of a five finger bargain, when I dealt in good faith."

Their eyes sparkled once more. "You know the Sableye well, Weavile. Very well. I acc-" They both shook their heads once more, and looked sickened. "-we accept this offer."

"What ails you two?" I asked, out of my own stupid curiosity. They smirked in sync, and their gemstone eyes gleamed a fearsome red as they began opening the large steel door.

"You haven't paid for that information, sir Sunbaneâ€|" They sneered.

"Very well." I peeked up, and looked around the newly discovered room. It held several cages, but only one was filled as of now, with a surprised but spitefully looking Bliss. The rest of the room "well, cave really" only held small metal cooling containers, which I presumed to be the drug Static was talking about earlier.

"We have paid in full, and expect compensation." The Sableye responded, now looking more menacing with the dim light of a dying bulb highlighting their dark, elongated claws.

"Alas friends, there is yet one more price you must pay before the information is yours." I grinned to myself.

"What?"

"Catch me!"

To an untrained eye, the Weavile suddenly dashed off away from the arena. The Sableye howled and tore after it, slowly gaining on the unfortunate fellow. The chase would last a minute or two.

I, however, was beside the cage, mimicking the cool cave air. I walked calmly to the Bliss's cage, as she stared though me at the commotion beyond the door. She looked up again, then dove behind her bedding, and fetched a small, crude metal device. I watched wordlessly as she shoved the metal piece into the lock, and began tinkering with it carefully.

"My \_dear.\_" I spoke, though I appeared as nothing. "Whoever gave you that lock pick would be startled to see you handling it with such \_carelessness.\_" The Bliss almost dropped the lock pick out of shock, then shoved it quickly in her pouch.

"Who's there!?" She demanded, backing away from the cage.

"A friend." I closed the metal doors, and revealed myself. "Up for a hoist?"

She grinned, and her eyes grew large. "You're gonna break me out of here?"

"Break." I frowned. "Why must everything be so \_destructive \_with you? Aren't you a healer?"

She looked down awkwardly.

"Here." I held out my paw. "Give me the lock pick."

She placed the lock pick hesitantly in my hands. She had no reason to trust me of course, which made the gesture all the more symbolic. I could have betrayed her right here, of course. Told the guards of her treachery. I could have worked here, and have come to take the lock pick.

Alas, I was on her side, and upon grabbing the lock pick, I inserted it gently into the lock.

"Why are you going at it so slowly?" She hissed quietly. I smirked at

her unease.

"What is your name?" I prodded, though I already knew the answer.

"Charity. Why?"

"Charity." I tested the name on my tongue, before continuing. "Humans have a myth that there exists but one person that you should call their love. This person would always be faithful to you, and would treat you better than any other on the planet. This person was born for you, and you for call this person your soul mate."

"â€|Okay? Why is that relevant?"

"Becauseâ€|" I smiled as the pick began to work. "Humans fashion their tools in a similar manner. Only one key in the world was built for this lock, and for only one lock the key."

"Then break it?" She suggested.

I peeked up from the lock. "Would you say that to a lover?"

"What?"

I resumed my lock-picking. "When a lock breaks, it often shuts to all keys, even the one meant for it. What my job is, is not to damage the lock at all. Simply mimic the key that it was meant for. Caress it. Convince it that I indeed am its key, and then?" The lock popped open.

"Then?" Charity didn't escape instantly, and instead waited for me to finish my tale.

"I don't know." I admitted. "Perchance leave, the lock never knowing you weren't its key after all. Perhaps stay, and fashion yourself its key anyway."

"Wouldn't that leave the world with a lonely key?"

"We're all lonely keys. Get your lock while you can." I grinned, and motioned for her to escape. She nodded, and clumsily waddled out of the cage. Very clumsily. \_Troublingly \_clumsily.

"Are you alright?" I asked, hesitant for the answer.

Charity blushed and laughed lightly. "Um, I'm expecting."

"Oh? Congratulations!"

She smiled. "Haha, don't be too surprised. Us Chansey and Blissey are a bit different than other PokÃ©mon. We lay eggs all the time, but they're not meant as incubators. Wellâ€|" She blushed again. "MOST of them aren't. They're more like stones, really. Nothing lives inside them, but those that hold onto them and that have love in their hearts find a bit more luck along their path than usual."

"Really?"

"Mmmm." She nodded. "Legend says that the first Togepi actually hatched from our fatherless eggs, but only for one pure of heart. I don't believe it though." She rubbed her stomach happily. "I think they're just little bits of luck for us to give back to the world."

"Touching." I smiled.

"Do you have a plan for our escape?" She asked calmly. "Perhaps become invisible once more? Can you do that to me as well?"

"Well, I wanted something a bit more theatrical, but I suppose that will have to do." I smirked. "You won't see my illusion, but everyone else will. Even if they stare right at you, into your very eyes, they will not see you. They can FEEL you though, so make sure not to touch anyone, alright?"

"Got it."

Together, we sneaked through the door. To my dismay, the entrance was much more crowded now, and it would be nearly impossible to walk through undetected.

Like all places however, there was more than one exit.

I glanced at the open ocean. Nova said it was a long fall; from here I estimated a bit less than three stories. I took a step back from the ledge, impressed by Nova's fortitude. With no other evident escape, I thought about Nova's hurried but effective solution.

"Psssst." I whispered to Charity. "How well can you swim?"

"Swim?" She snorted. "Does it look like I can swim?"

I looked her over again and frowned at rather pudgy frame. Her tiny arms and feet didn't look particularly adept at long distance swimming.

\_Damn.\_

"I can FLOAT really well though!" She giggled. "There's a story of a man who tried to drown a Blissys. After three days he gave up!" She snorted again. "I can't swim, but I'll die from dehydration before I'll drown."

\_I can work with that. Might be a touch awkward, but I could paddle ON her. Save me energy, and get us both to shore. I'll be faster than Nova too, since I know the way.\_

"Alright. On three, we're jumping down there. I want you to stand like a-" I looked at her frame once more, and choose to ignore the diving tips. "â€|nevermind. On three, we're jumping into the water."

"WHAT!?" She hissed in an angry whisper. "Are you INSANE?"

"One." I prepared to jump.

"I am \_not \_going to jump!"

"Twoâ€|" I smirked, choosing not to hear her pleas.

"No! Augh, I don't even know your NAME! I am NOT jumping who-knows-how-many-feet-"

"Three!" I leapt.

"â€|Damn it!" I heard behind me.

\_Hah.\_

My snout stung when it hit the water, despite my perfect dive. The cool ocean reinvigorated me, and I quickly swam up to the surface. When I got there, I was greeted by a very angry and wet Blissy.

"Wow." I whistled quietly. "You got to the surface faster than me."

"I \_didn't go under!\_" She hissed. I saw her backside, which was completely red.

"Ouch. You didn't dive, did you?" I winced.

"Dive? \_Dive? \_Oh, if only I had thought of THAT. Because of my extremely aerodynamic frame and all!"

I stifled a laugh. "Come on, let's get out of here."

"\_I CAN'T SWIM!\_" Charity growled, flailing and kicking at the sky.

"I remember." I grinned. I sunk slightly under water, then kicked suddenly, pouncing on her stomach.

"Ack! What are you doing!?" She squealed. She rotated wildly, causing me to almost fall to onside, then the other.

"Trying to- oof!" I caught a mouthful of fist as she flailed. "Trying toâ€|swimâ€|with you!" I growled back. "Stop struggling!"

She tried to calm down, and I adjusted myself across her vertically. I pressed my back paws in the water, and started an efficient paddle to shore. I though balancing on her would prove more of a challenge, but one grotesque fact helped our little venture: I was sinking INTO her. She was almost completely made of fat.

'\_I bet that's why she floats so wellâ€|\_' I grimaced to myself as I sunk entirely too deep into her frame. I glanced up at the cliff face once more, and was pleased to see our bit of splashing hadn't caught the attention of anyone. My illusions had done their workâ€|

\* \* \*

><p>The shore. It seemed like days, but at last it was there. With a few more kicks, I propelled us to the shore, panting with exertion.<p>

"Are you alright?" Charity looked down at me with concern.

"You have no idea..." I wheezed, "How BIG you are!"

Charity's look of concern melted into one of offense. "Hey! You try giving birth every few months, and keeping your figure!"

"At least do some pushups." I implored, and slowly struggled to my feet. I heard a 'hmp' behind me.

"It's not my fault I lay eggs." She grumbled to herself. "I like the 'giving people luck' part, but honestly, it's terrible sometimes."

"Oh?"

"Well for one, it makes me LOOK like an egg." She growled as we walked. "And giving birth nearly six times a year isn't pleasant either. But that isn't the worst part."

"What is?"

She looked at the floor, and glowered. "Whenever I laugh I pee a little."

I looked at her with disbelief, before swallowing my witty remark at her expense. At last, we arrived to the Pokémon Center. The nurse was standing by the entrance, and ran to hug Charity as soon as she came into view.

"Charity!" She yelped, and grabbed her tightly in her arms.

"Astrid!" Charity yelped in return, and grasped the nurse with her tiny paws.

"Are you alright? Did they hurt you?" The nurse knelt down and pressed her fingers to her paw, feeling for a pulse. Charity pushed her hand away and smiled.

"No, no, I'm fine. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine if you are." The nurse pulled Charity in another tight, fierce hug. "Oh, I'm just so glad you're alright!"

"Excuse me." I prodded at the nurse's ankles with my paw. "Um, do you know where my trainer is?"

"Ummm..." The nurse hesitated, "Actually, he's in custody..."

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

What an insane day. My brain was spinning from the events that transpired. From the arrest, to waiting at the court, to the nurse's explanation to the bailiff, it had been an eventful day. As of now, I was content to lay on the cot next to Static's and let my mind relax after the stress of the past week.

Static snoozed quietly beside me, and I quietly stroked Myst with a subconscious hand. She purred lightly, but appeared somewhat uncomfortable with the closeness of the action. When I noticed this I pulled away, but she instinctively nipped at my fingers, and put her ears back under my hand. Reluctantly I continued, rolling my eyes at her indecision.

She was pleased with herself, of course. Well-deserved. Along with the nurse, I had praised her on a risky job well done. It could have gone much worse, and for now, I was just pleased it hadn't.

Skarr had also done his job well. He had guarded Static like a hawk until I returned from the hardware store. Although I felt a bit guilty for my slight manipulation, the job I gave him acted as a bit of a repentance for his former mistake. He was able to sleep after I relieved him of duty, and I waited quietly outside. I didn't actually expect Overdose of course, but when he came, I was prepared.

Overdose was getting treatment now, but not in this facility. They had restrained him, but he had broken out and destroyed some very sensitive equipment, and severely wounded several doctors and nurses. It took nearly four times the normal dose of anesthetic to put him under, and several armed guards to do it. Afterwards, he was flown to a more secure mental facility with better restraints, and supposedly experience with the more difficult patients. The Pikachu downstairs was also taken there.

The Arena was also swarmed by the police the next night. They caught dozens of PokÃ©mon and humans, under charges of illegal gambling and several counts of assault and attempted murder. I was originally terrified that those that didn't get arrested would be coming after us before Sandy politely reminded me that they had no idea who we were, and to the best of their knowledge 'Snivel' was dead.

Sandy, Nova, and Myst were all in in the hotel room, watching movies, and passing the time. They would check on us a few times a day of course, and we would talk, but they knew we needed our rest. Wiggly would hold Static's paw while they talked, and hug him lightly when she thought no one was looking. Nova would scurry over to me, and tell me the summery of the last few movies they had seen, 'so I wouldn't miss out'. Sandy would sit on the side of my bed, and call me names, but they were meant with a kind heart, even if said with a sharp tongue. We laughed together, and made the most of our time spent recovering.

To my relief, the medical staff was making a full recovery in the careful hands of their peers. Our Battle Park ticket was extended, courtesy of the Battle Park Police Force. We were also apologized to profusely by the police force, especially by the kind officer whom I spoke with before passing out. The nurse we helped â€" Astrid, I believe â€" also thanked us profusely for our help, and apologized for her earlier rude behavior. I half expected her Blissey to hand Myst a lucky egg for her troubles, but it appeared that Charity wasn't too pleased by her methods of rescue. Oh well. No good comes from expecting rewards from kind actions, and I wasn't disappointed. My team was safe, and with some time to rest, we would all be healthy again.

\* \* \*



><p>"Alright. Let's get that cast off you, shall we?"<p>

[What are you doing with that electric saw!?!]

"Stop squirming, will you? Hold still, this will be over in a moment."

[JOOSH!] Static yelped as the saw's blade moved closer to his neck.

[Relax, static. This doesn't cut skin, it only cuts the cast. Promise.]

Static gulped, and his gaze didn't break from the saw. [O-okay man, I t-trust you, b-but shit, are you sure!?!]

Astrid quickly cut the cast in half, smiling at Static's hesitance. "There. All done. That wasn't so bad now, right?"

Static sat motionless on the bed, breathing heavily, and looking petrified at the saw. He then looked back at me, and checked his fur to make sure it wasn't cut.

[I can't BELIEVE that didn't kill me.] He sighed.

"Psssssh!" Nova hissed into his hand. [Josh finds your lack of faith disturbing!]

I rolled my eyes at Nova's reference.

[Okay. Now, we need to be gentle here.] The nurse stressed. [Even after the cast comes off, that doesn't mean you're okay. You still need to be gentle with yourself, and make sure you get plenty of rest, alright? NO battling for at least a week-]

[Oh come ON!] Static pouted.

[-Hey. I don't want you coming back here, and making your poor friends sit in their rooms all day, all right?] Astrid stated.

[We didn't mind!] Nova chimed, then backpedaled. [O-or, I mean, I didn't mind. Did you guys mind? Sorry, I didn't mean to like-]

[We didn't mind.] Myst assisted Nova.

[Nevertheless.] The nurse continued. [I want you to take it easy, alright? Promise me.]

[I promiiiiiseâ€¦] Static grudgingly responded.

[Good. Okay, I'm going to remove your cast now. It might feel a bit strange at first-]

[Augh!] Skarr winced in the corner of the room. [What is that odor?]

[Ewwwww!] Nova covered his snout, and Myst shied away. I winced along with Sandy.

[Now now, that's normal.] Astrid scolded telepathically. [He hasn't been able to wash his stomach because of the cast!]

[Gross!] Static looked down, and saw his matted, brownish fur. [Ah, it looks all nasty! Will this get better!?!]

[Oh yes. You just need to wash it out, and you'll be right back to normal.] Astrid smiled.

[Okay, GOOD. I was worried I would end up like Overdose or somethingâ€¦] Static gulped.

[No, no, no. You only had minor traces of the drug in your system, and you've only taken it once. The side effects usually don't take hold unless you've taken a significantly higher amount of the substance.]

[Usually?]

[I wouldn't worry if I were you.] She gave Static another reassuring smile. [For now, I would focus on showeringâ€¦you ARE a bit ripeâ€¦] Static winced, and hopped out of bed. I cringed at his sudden motion, and he gave me a glare.

[I can still JUMP. Am I allowed to jump? Nurse lady, help me out here.]

[I would prefer no sudden movements for at least a few more daysâ€¦] Astrid mumbled.

[Gawd! I don't need to be babied here! I'm already not battling, what more do you guys want!?!]

[We're just trying to keep you safe, Stat.] I stated calmly, trying to sooth him down.

[Auuugh! Can I at least take \_shower \_alone? Or should I not risk injuring myself?] Static growled.

[You should be fine.] Astrid mentioned quickly.

[Thank you.] Static hissed, and walked out of the room, and towards the door.

[Just be careful!] Skarr chimed evilly. Static gave him a rude gesture with his paw as he walked back to the room.

\* \* \*

><p>(Static POV)<p>

\_Useless.\_

The hot water poured over me, and soaked deep into my muscles, and washing off the filth and grime that had smeared into my coat. The water and steam felt good, after having nothing but the touch of bedding on my body for days.

\_Useless.\_

Here we were, at the Battle Park. Josh's dream. And I was completely ruining it! We should be battling!

\_We should be meeting people to battle, and learning about battle stuff, and watching people battle, and&#128;|\_

&#128;|\_and instead he's sitting with me, waiting for me to heal. In a week, we'll be gone, and back to Kanto. We won't even be able to battle at the STUPID BATTLE PARK!\_

I hit my head against the tile wall in frustration, with the steam bellowing around me. The water was missing me now, and all I had for warmth was the large white cloud, and the water on my face.

\_Water on my face? Shit, am I CRYING?\_

I wiped my face angrily with a paw, and stepped back into the water.

\_Josh must be so bored. Him and everyone else.\_

I growled, and scrubbed my fur harder.

\_Ruining a once-in-a-lifetime-\_

"Augh!" I shouted, and threw the soap as hard as I could. I felt something tear across my side, and I instantly cringed and fell to the floor. The water pelted me as I held my side, clenching my teeth in pain.

"Static!?" I heard Josh yelp from the other side of the door. I opened my mouth to respond, but my snout was pressing against the tub, which was filled with a few inches of water. I gurgled something, but I doubt he heard me.

"STATIC!" He screamed once more. I tried to push myself up, but the pain in my side returned, and I slumped back. The door burst open, and I felt Josh's hands grasp me, and pull me out of the water. He rushed me to the bed, and placed me there gently but quickly, with a careful yet desperate efficiency. He stared at me for a moment, then breathed a sigh of relief.

[Oh good, you're breathing.] He let out a tense chuckle. [I was gonna me pissed if I had to do mouth-to-mouth.]

I laughed a bit, but I held my side. He caught my action, and frowned. [I'm going to call the nurse.]

[Don't!] I shouted, and pawed at his jacket. [I'm fine, really! Please? She'll put me in a cast again, and then I won't be able to battle with you!]

[Static, you're not battling here anyway, you'll hurt yourself. A week off, remember?] Josh scolded.

[Oh come on! T-this is the Battle Park! You talk about this place all the time, and now that you're here we can't do anything, and I'm just being useless and hurt and-]

[Static.] Josh rested a calming hand on my head.

[-I'm keeping all you guys from doing anything fun, and you guys are just doing this because I've been through some stuff and I was a bit roughed up-]

[Static! This isn't your fault.] Josh said strongly, rubbing one of my ears. I was still upset, but that small motion made me forget exactly what I was mad about.

[Yeah, butâ€¦] I trailed off.

[But what? We're your friends. We're here to support you, no matter what. Even if you can't battle, we can find other things to do. Heck, we're at the Battle Park! At the very least, we can watch other people.]

[It's not the same.] I sulked, sinking into the sheets.

[Wellâ€¦hmmmm.] Josh thought. [Do YOU really miss battling?]

[I miss battling for you.]

[But do YOU miss battling?] He asked again.

[Umâ€¦I don't know. I guess not. That stuff with Overdose kindaâ€¦I don't know. I'm not feeling it right now, I guess. I'm sure I will, butâ€¦] I sighed.

[Okay. So you're sad because you feel like you're letting me down, and I can't battle without you? Is that it?]

[â€¦Yeah.] I nodded.

[Alright. Well, I have an idea then.] Josh winked, and stood up from the bed. [It's going to take some convincing from Sandy though. And I'll need your help.] He smirked.

[What can I do, Josh?] I sat up, eager to help.

[First? We need to track down that nurse, and make sure you're okay. Secondlyâ€¦well, I'll tell you after.]

[Josh! No, you'll tell me now. Josh? Josh!] I whined impatiently.

\* \* \*

><p>[Sandy! Sandy, Sandy, Sandy!]<p>

[Someone's awake.] She giggled, walking into the room.

[Sandy!] I yelped again, making sure to get her attention. [Josh wants to tell you something!]

[I do?] Josh asked.

[Yes! You do! The thing, remember! The thing you needed her help for after we got the cast from the nurse, but you wouldn't tell me!]

[Oh that.] Josh grinned, and I had the feeling he knew what I was

talking about from the very beginning.

[Tell her!] I begged.

[Alright, alright. I was wondering if you could do me a favor.] Josh turned to Sandy.

[Oh? What?]

[I was hoping to challenge the Battle Tower while I was here, and I was wondering if you could loan-]

[Palmer!] Sandy smashed her hand to her face. [Oh \_shit, \_I have a battle with him soon!]

[Um, what?] Josh looked concerned.

[Sorry, you just reminded me of that with the 'rental PokÃ©mon' thing! Argh, I completely forgot about it! I should have been reviewing my notesâ€¦!] Sandy pressed her hand to her head again.

[Calm down a sec.] Josh placed his hand on hers, and pulled it away from her face. [What do you need to do to prepare?]

[Just review videos of him battling other brains, and see what tactics I can use against him. Against normal people he's simple, but he'll pull all the stops against me. This battle's going to be televised too, and if I lose I won't hear the end of it for weeks.] She groaned.

[Well, how about this.] Josh perked up. [How about we all help you study a bit tonight?]

[That would be great, butâ€¦] Sandy sighed. [I don't know. I think I work best alone, for the most part. Tonight would be fine, but I really need to get into my top game over the next few days to fight Palmer. I'm sorry, I thought we would only be here a weekâ€¦] She trailed off.

[It's fine, we understand.] Josh nodded. [Could we borrow some PokÃ©mon from the Battle Factory though? Rentals of course, just-]

[Yeah, yeah, sure.] Sandy waved off the question. [I take them all the time. That's how I got Krookodile and Charizard.]

[Awesome, thanks.] Josh smiled. [Alright, so we'll help you tonight, then we'll be off tomorrow. Sound good?]

[Mmmm.] Sandy nodded. [Yeah. Alright. Is everything good here? You guys are checked out, Static's alright?]

[Yup. He got a bit of a restraint for his side-]

[Meh.] I interjected.

[-he doesn't like it, but it works.] Josh added. [So yeah, we're good.]

[Alright then.] Sandy looked up, and shot us both a smile. [So, my place, then?]

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

My jaw hit the floor as soon as we reached Sandy's floor. Her apartment was incredible. An entire wall was dedicated to a massive window, which looked out over the city, and across the ocean. All the furniture was sleek and modern, with smooth, curved edges. Another wall was a large white wall, which I quickly realized was meant for the projector.

Other than the fancy glass and furniture, the place looked a bit empty. Almost as if it wasn't lived in, and if everything was more for a theatre set than actually living. Nothing was out of place, and everything was meticulously clean. Not at all like the cabin.

Not to say the cabin was disorganized, however. It was just more alive. Her bed wasn't made, there were pictures of her and Wigglytuff on the walls, and some dishes were in the sink. It looked cozy. This didn't look as cozy, and gave off a cool, almost hollow feel. Though it looked beautiful, this wasn't a home.

Over the next few hours, we all helped quiz Sandy on the different techniques Palmer liked to utilize in battle. I learned that he frequently fought Baton Pass teams, and as a result used a Weavile with a move called 'Beat Up', which attacked multiple times in quick succession. Against her though he wouldn't likely use such tactics, and would likely fight much more unpredictably. We made her flash cards and quizzed her on different techniques, but by the end of the night it became apparent that we wouldn't be much help.

[Thank you anyway, everyone.] Sandy smiled as the clock ticked dangerously close to midnight. [It's been fun, but I definitely need some rest. Look for me on T.V. in a few days, alright?] She smirked.

[Will do!] Nova chimed.

[Of course.] Skarr bowed.

[Definitely!] Static nodded.

[Certainly.] Myst purred.

[I can still help, right?] Wiggly pouted.

[Of course.] Sandy smiled.

[Alright, we'll be seeing you, then.] I smiled, and turned to leave.

[W-well, it's late!] Sandy yelped. I turned and gave her a quizzical look, and she backpedaled in an attempt to save face. [I mean, I have a guest room, if you would all like to sleep here for the night.]

I smirked. [Well, I doubt we would all fit on one bed-]

[I have two.] She said quickly. [And one for Wiggly, of course.]

[Still, I doubt we would all fit on two-]

"Then I GUESS one of you is going to have to sleep with me." She hissed in my ear. "Preferably, the one most human."

"Awww, but I thought you were \_tire-\_" Sandy flicked my nose. "Ouch! What was that for!?"

"You know what that was for." She growled.

## 16. The rise of Nightshade

(Sandy POV)

"Bleh."

I collapsed on my sofa, with a half-finished can of soda clutched haphazardly in my hand. It had been two days since Josh had been here, and coincidentally also two days since I last talked to a sentient creature. I grabbed a stained copy of my notes off my smudged glass table, from where I spilt my coffee from last night.

I looked over the paper, not really reading it, more just going over the motions. I wasn't overly confident, or really even confident to begin with. In truth, I was just bored. I didn't want to do this. Battles should be all gut, not statistics and math.

"\_Bleeeeeeeehâ€¦\_"

Still, it was important that I win this battle. Otherwise I wouldn't just be mocked by Palmer, I would be on the news for weeks. Not only did I not want the publicity, I would \_like \_to be able to spent that time with Josh. Almost all the time I put aside was taken when Static was in the hospital â€" not that I'm upset about that, of course. It's expected that he should spend time with Static when he was injured, and not with me.

\_â€¦and leave me in the room with Nova all day, watching old moviesâ€¦\_"

"Aaaaa\_aaughhhh\_â€¦\_" I groaned, and tried to clear my head. I loathed looking over my old notes at his battles, but I loathed not doing it more. Lack of preparation was the quickest way to fall in a competitive battle such as this, yetâ€¦

\_I'd take the damn movies with the Charmeleon over thisâ€¦\_"

It was noon and I had just woken up and cracked my first energy drink. Instead of actually reading the notes, I flipped on the projector.

\_â€¦Just five minutes. And I'll be watching the Battle Station. See, I'm still learning. This isn't procrastination at all.\_

I slouched lower in the chair, and my stomach growled loudly. It could have been a complaint from my lack of breakfast, or a grievance from last night's cheap pizza.

\_Why am I always out of food? Wait, no! I have a slice of pizza left from last night. Awww yeah.\_

I stumbled over to my refrigerator, and retrieved the last slice. I sat back down on my chair, and greedily consumed the last slice of the cold pizza. My stomach gurgled with contentment, and I wiped my greasy hands on my notes.

\_Cold pizza and energy drinks. Breakfast of champions.\_

I hiccupped from the soda, and slouched further into the sofa, content to let my mind drift for a few moments before I began 'studying' once more. To my surprise, Palmer was on the projector wall. I begrudgingly focused a bit more.

"Are you on your fight against Sandy, later this afternoon?" A reporter asked. Palmer smiled, and waved at the camera.

"She is a worthy opponent, but with my fan's support, I'm sure we'll have a rousing battle."

\_The words of one who knows he's going to lose.\_ I smirked, sipping my soda.

"And what do you think of your other, possible combatant?" The reporter questioned.

\_Other contestant? \_

"Only time will tell," He spoke wisely, "But from what I know, I don't believe he has even finished the Elite Four. I don't have high hopes that he will be much of a challenge."

"Bold words!" The reporter smiled.

"We'll see if they're earned." He smiled coyly.

\_Combatant? Did a trainer make it through his tower? I haven't been watching television for a few days, which means this 'trainer' would have needed to beat fifty trainers in the span of two days. \_

My sleep deprived, pizza addled brain slowly began to piece together the clues.

\_Also, what kind of trainer could beat the fifty trainers in the battle tower, yet not beat the Elite four?\_

I felt like I was on the cusp of some great discovery, with the answer only a pizza's breath away.

\_If they had Pok mon that could beat the trainers, then they would have beaten they would have beaten the Elite four.\_

I was so close!

\_Unless unless UNLESS THEY WERE RENTALS!\_



Ah-hah!

\_And they were borrowed from the Battle Factory!\_

I had it!

\_But whoâ€|Only I have access to that.\_

Oh yeahâ€|

\_But waitâ€|\_

Oh?

\_Joshâ€|Josh made that casual comment about wanting to borrow the rental PokÃ©mon. \_

He didn't.

\_If he had the right PokÃ©mon, and the right items, he's probably smart enoughâ€|Auuugh, now I have to call him.\_

I reached for my phone on the glass table, accidentally knocking it to the floor.

\_Auuuughhhhhhâ€|\_

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

\*\*\_"KNOCKOUT!"\_\*\*

[Heeeelllllll yeah!] Static shouted, hopping on my shoulder. I high fived him, and smiled at my Terrakion. Well, the rental Terrakion, of course. Borrowed with permission from Sandy's Battle Factory.

The Terrakion snorted with triumph, and looked expectantly at his PokÃ©ball. With a quick shimmer of light he was back inside, and ready for another brawl.

[That's fifty!] Static chimed. [Now we can battle Palmer!]

[See?]I nudged my Pikachu with my head. [I told you this would be fun!]

[â€|Alright, fine, this was fun.] Static rolled his eyes. [Now we battle Palmer, right?]

[Yup! Let's get the team out first, though. Then we'll head downstairs and-]

[Enough talking! I wanna tell them we won!] Static yelped excitedly. I smirked, and sent out our team.

\* \* \*

><p>[So why are we doing this again?] Nova asked, with an air of hesitancy around his voice.<p>

[What do you mean?] I asked.

[Wellâ€¦] Nova rung his hands, trying to formulate his thoughts. [What is our \_goal, \_here? Is this just for sport? Just because we can? Just because we're here at the Battle Park?]

I thought for a moment. [Well, yes. Beating a Frontier Brain is a respectable victory. I don't think I can name a trainer that's beaten a Brain before beating the Elite four.]

[Right.] Nova swallowed again. [Butâ€¦isn't that kind of Sandy's fear?]

[Hmmm?]

[Think of it this way.] Nova articulated, [Sandy doesn't \_like \_being famous, right? That's one of the reasons she didn't tell us that she was actually Alessandria. She likes you for you are as a person of course, but also because she doesn't feel like you're pressuring her to be someone she's not.] Nova looked up at me for confirmation, and I gave him a nod. [Alright. So, and I'm not saying she doesn't \_like \_being in the spotlight, but it's reasonable to assume that she doesn't like it all the time. She comes to Kanto to escape all of that, and she's not widely recognized. But!] Nova paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. [If you become famous by beating Palmer, then you will be put in the spotlight. She will get attention for being with you, and then you \_both \_will be in the spotlight, her included, even if she doesn't want to be.]

I stopped for a moment, and pressed my tongue against my cheek. He had a point. If I were to go through with this, and I won, Sandy and I may have even less time to spend together. Suddenly I wasn't sure if I wanted to go thought with this. What \_was \_I trying to achieve?

\_I suppose my thought process didn't go much farther than amusing Static, and trying to get the next big, shiny--

[What if you didn't win?] Myst smirked, interrupting my thoughts.

[Eh. Even losing now would probably draw attention.] I waved off her comment.

[No, no, no, you misunderstand.] Myst gazed up at me with her hypnotizing red eyes. [What if \_you \_didn't win? What if someone else won? You wouldn't lose, you simply wouldn't be the one competing.]

[â€¦Explain?] I asked.

[What would you like to be?] Myst grinned. [Black? Tan? freckled? Personally, I always believed you would look good with black hair.]

I beamed, suddenly understanding. [You want to disguise me!]

[Great idea, Myst!] Nova grinned.

[There is no one better at disguises than me, my liege.] Myst purred.

[And if I was under your illusion, I would still be the one to claim the victory.] I considered. [Very nice plan.]

[And what shall your guise be then, Josh?] Skarr pondered.

[Something unrecognizable.] I responded. [It shouldn't just be me with a few scars, or like black hair. It should be somethingâ€¦] I trailed off.

[Grander.] Skarr finished.

[It should be unique.] Myst nodded.

[It should be something people talk about!] Nova chimed.

[I think I have an idea.] I smirked. [It's from an old legend...but, it might be difficult to pull off. Let me talk to Myst for a moment, and see if this is feasibleâ€¦]

\* \* \*

><p>(Sandy POV)<p>

[He's an asshole.]

[It's sure damn annoying.]

[When he calls you again, just don't pick up. Just don't do it. See how he likes it.]

Wigglytuff sat across the couch from me, looking equally lethargic and disgruntled. Josh hadn't picked up any of my last calls, and I was getting increasingly frustrated.

[That won't solve anythingâ€¦] I sighed. [I actually DO want to talk to him. See what the heck is up, and if he is the one that's fighting Palmer.]

[I doubt it.] Wigglytuff looked down, and rubbed her belly. [I'm hungry.]

[I knooooowwwwww.] I moaned. [You're always hungry!]

[Because you don't ever have food!]

[I have food sometimes!]

[Leftovers don't count!]

[You can eat leftovers! Leftovers are food!]

[Leftovers are NOT food! Food is stuff you get at the \_store\_]

[Shush! The battle's about to start!]

[But Saaandy! I'm hungr-]

[Shush!]

"Alessandra, our next contestant and Frontier Brain, will now be facing Palmer, a fellow Frontier Brain, in a battle of wits, cunning, and power!" The announcer cheered, shaking the small auditorium. I turned down the volume slightly, and shot Wiggly a worried look.

[The hell? I'm not on till five. Right?] I looked at Wiggly for confirmation. [Right?] She shrugged. I looked at the clock, which read 2:03pm.

"Presenting, Sandy, the Froneer Brai-hhhrm" Abruptly, the announcer coughed roughly, interrupting his speech. He doubled over and held his throat giving way to extremely raspy, harsh sounding coughs. Both Wiggly and I were on the edge of our seats, looking perturbed and worried at the announcer. He continued coughing violently and fell to the floor, with small specks of black flying from his lips, and landing on the floor below. The man shuddered on the floor clutching his stomach as a small pool of black ooze dribbled out of his mouth. His eyes shut closed harshly at first, then relaxed as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Wiggly and I looked at each other, and then resumed looking at the projection. Someone in the audience screamed. The auditorium shook slightly, though from the camera or from actual shaking I didn't know. The lights dimmed significantly, until it was difficult to discern anything on the screen. Suddenly, a low and mysterious voice echoed through the stage.

\*\*\_"There have been rumors though the night, rumors that mortals no longer fear the darkness."\_\*\* A voice rumbled. The camera panned to the audience, who were all looking horrified. Some tried to run out of the emergency exits. \*\*\_"They tell me that you believe you can hide away, and find safety with the falseness that is your...light."\_\*\*The screen showed the announcer on the floor, and the small black pool at his lips. Slowly, the black pool began to bubble. \*\*\_"There are those that say that darkness can be defeatedâ€¦|"\_\*\*

"What do you want!?" A woman screamed in the audience. It was a scream of someone who was crazed with fear. The bubbling stopped, and an eerie silence filled the darkened auditorium.

\*\*\_"What do I want?"\_\*\*The voice pondered. \*\*\_"I wantâ€¦|I want to show you the extent of the shadows. There is one by the name of Palmer here, one who is renowned for his battling prowess. I wish to meet this man, and duel him. I wish to prove even he is no match for the dark."\_\*\*

"N-no one battles Palmer without the sufficient forms!" A receptionist yelled from the back. "Fifty trainers, all in a row! No exceptions!"

\*\*\_"This will suffice."\_\*\*The voice returned, and mystically, a stack of papers materialized in the air. The receptionist hesitantly walked forward and grabbed the papers, and looked enough them carefully. After a moment, her face grew pale.

"Thisâ€|this is all in order." She shivered. "Whoâ€|who are you?"

The black puddle began to bubble once more, and slowly, a figure began to rise out of the tar, forming legs, a torso, arms, broad shoulders, and face with glowing red eyes, and spiky hair. The entire being was the same color as the pool; dark and devoid of light.

\*\*\_"I am the being that will remind you of what your shadow truly is."\*\*The creature smiled with hauntingly white teeth. \*\*\_"You may address me as Nightshade. Now, bring me thisâ€|'Palmer'."\*\*

After a few moments, Palmer stepped forwards. He stood tall, and wore a light green jacket over a smooth, clean white shirt. His blond hair was slicked back, and he had a determined look on his face, unlike most who were petrified with fear.

"You wanted to face me, aberration?" Palmer glared, a PokÃ©ball fiercely grasped in one hand.

\*\*\_"I do. I want the standard Battle Tower rule set; a three on three battle."\*\*Nightshade smirked, the dim lights reflecting off his pitch black skin.

"What are the stakes?" Palmer looked at the creature with concerned eyes.

\*\*\_"Your SOUL!"\*\*The creature shrieked, feinting a diving at Palmer. Palmer jumped back in fright, but the aberration never truly moved. \*\*\_"Or the certificate of victory for the Battle Tower. Either one."\*\*

Palmer took a shaky breath. "And if I should win?"

The creature scoffed. \*\*\_"If you should defeat the darkness itself, I shall disappear forever, and never again shall a human again hear an utterance of the name 'Nightshade'."\*\*

"â€|Deal." Palmer nodded. "Are you ready then?"

\*\*\_"The Darkness is always ready."\*\* Nightshade smirked.

[Duuude what the heeeelllllllll?] Wiggly grinned, looking at me with wide, excited cyan eyes.

[I don't know!] I laughed nervously, content to see how this battle would unfold.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

"Go, Weavile!"

\*\*\_Arise, one who has abandoned your soul to a shell, and has been birthed anew."\*\*

A Ninjask and a Weavile faced off, each eyeing each other with a

practiced caution. I smiled as the shadows melded into nothingness at my fingertips. Myst had truly outdone herself with this disguise, and everything was falling into place perfectly. Even the announcer had played his part perfectly â€" collapsing, and allowing Myst's illusion to play its part. I made a mental note to thank him later.

\_But not now. Now, I must focus. First, the painfully, insultingly obvious.\_

"Weavile, use Fake out!" Palmer shouted.

\*\*\_"Ninjask, Protect!"\_\*\*

The Weavile jumped up, and swung her paw at the flying bug. A silver sheen swept across the Ninjask, and it narrowly deflected the blow.

\_Now, the game begins.\_

"Nightshadeâ€|" Palmer's eyes shone suddenly. "â€|for one born of the night, you make anâ€|odd choice of moves."

\_Take the bait, fishy-fishâ€|\_

"\*\*\_I make the move that I deem necessary." \_\*\*I quipped.

"You make a move that may have already cost you the battle." He smiled.

\_It's right in front of you Palmer. See the bait, just not the hookâ€|\_

"Weavile." He smirked. "Use Beat Up."

\_Oh, clever move! One would normally use substitute, but a move like Beat Up hits multiple times, rendering Substitute not only useless, but lethal. In a normal battle, that would have rendered one out of my three PokÃ©mon defeated. \_

\_â€|But this isn't a normal battle, is it Palmer?\_

\*\*\_"Return, Ninjask! Terrakion, I summon thee!"\_\*\*

"Terra-, wait, what!?" Palmer shook his head.

"Weava!" Weavile shouted obediently, now attacking her new opponent. A Terrakion appeared out of the familiar red glow, wielding a light blue scarf tied around one horn. Terrakion instantly received a rain of blows, all cloaked in a dark energy. Only upon the third successful strike did Terrakion manage to throw off the Weavile.

The Terrakion looked well for one that had taken so many blows. In fact, it looked stronger than it once had. Righteous anger burned in its eyes; a memory of a battle long ago. A hard snort erupted from its snout and it smashed a hoof into the ground, hot blooded and ready for battle.

Meanwhile, Palmer's face grew pale.

"Justified." Palmer sighed, and slumped slightly. "For every dark type move made against Terrakion, Terrakion becomes more powerful. And since Beat Up hits more than once, you just achieved the equivalent of three Dragon Dances in terms of attack." He stopped to catch his breath. "Youâ€|you turned my strategy against me. You are no ordinary trainerâ€|"

I smirked, but said nothing.

"Setting up to destroy my entire team with one PokÃ©mon is riskyâ€|" His cool, calculating eyes burned into my own. "Was the Ninjask just a ploy this whole time?" I could tell he was playing for time, but my next move required his action first. "Noâ€|you're too clever. It may have been a rouse, but your third PokÃ©mon builds off the power the Ninjask. Without it, it will only beâ€|" He gave me a knowing smirk. "A \_shadow\_ of its potential power. Which means your powerful little plan relies on one crux. You getting that attack boost, and making sure that, if your Terrakion should fall, your Ninjask is the next in the arena." He concluded.

\_Woah, he's right. Well, I suppose that wasn't an incredible feat of deduction, butâ€|that was certainly more than average. Fortunately, I don't plan on my Terrakion fainting.\_

\*\*\_"That is one possibility."\_\*\* I acknowledged, in Nightshade's deep, baritone.

"More than just \_one\_ possibility, wouldn't you say?" He smirked. "Also, judging by the Choice Scarf tied to your Terrakion, you already have a move selected to use against me. A move, likely, that is super effective to the type you would have previously predicted that I would use against you, and did. Darkness."

\_Palmer, I underestimated you...any more inspection, and you'll find that little hook I have hidden in your bait. My only respite is that I don't believe a trick like this has ever actually been attempted before in competitive battling.\_

"And you're clever." Palmer nodded again. "You, of course, would pick the move that was not only damaging, but guaranteed my destruction. A fighting type. And with 150% your normal speed, and 250% your normal attack, your Terrakion would be a force to be reckoned withâ€|unless of courseâ€|" Palmer gave one last cunning grin. "Return, Weavile! Go, Sableye!"

\*\*\_"Terrakion, use Agility!"\_\*\*

"You fool!" Palmer laughed with a crazed frenzy. "You've wasted your choice of moves on a move that not only doesn't do damage, but doesn't affect my PokÃ©mon! You're stuck!"

\*\*\_"Unless of course that was a normal blue scarf tied around his horn, and not one of your league's precious Choice Scarves."\_\*\*

Palmer's grin slowly faded, as realization crossed his face.

\*\*\_"You were so close, Palmer."\_\*\*I cooed.\*\*\_ "You were looking at the bait, and inspecting it from every angle. Your problem was, you were looking at it from the angle of a scholar and a master, not a

desperate shadow, hoping for his moment in the light." \_\*\*I bowed.  
\*\*\_"You are a worthy adversary, but in this battle it appears I have  
bested you."\_\*\*

"What moves does that Terrakion have?" Palmer sighed, and stared at  
the floor.

\*\*\_"Rockslide, Close Combat, and X-Scissor. Plus Agility, of  
course."\_\*\*

\_My heart pounded in my chest. Had I won? It was rude to ask another  
trainer their move set, unless the trainer whom asked was about  
toâ€|\_

Palmer winced. "â€|Yes. I-I forfeit. Congratulations, Shadow." He  
gave a begrudging smile. "You have indeed bested me."

It took every ounce of self-control not to jump from  
excitement.

\_Deep breaths. For Sandy. You have to keep this guise just a moment  
longer, then when the cameras are offâ€|\_

\*\*\_"Your soul, or the certificate then?" \_\*\*I smiled.

"I'll sign the certificate." Palmer chuckled. "I've become rather  
attached to my soulâ€|"

\* \* \*

><p>(Sandy POV)<p>

"How the heck did you pull that off?"

"Oh, what \_are \_you talking about?" I could almost feel Josh's smirk  
on the other end of the line. I sighed overdramatically into the  
phone.

"I just hope that poor announcer is alright."

"Oh, he's fine. I asked him for a bit of help beforehand, and he was  
kind enough to put his acting major to good use."

"Ah-\_hah\_! So it \_was \_you!"

"Not at all! It was Nightshade, Darkrai's alter ego, and the  
mysterious shadow of \*\*\_doom!\_\*\*"

"So, wow. You got the certificate, huh?"

"Yeah. I'm glad he held onto his soul; I have no idea what I would  
have done!"

"Ehh, they would have cut to commercial while you two were figuring  
it out."

"That's a relief." Josh chuckled, though it trailed off into a soft  
exhale.

"Something wrong?"



"Visa's almost up." Josh sighed.

"Oh no! Now you'll have to go back to battling, adventuring and having fun!" I smirked.

"Oh shut up." Josh giggled, caught off guard.

"And you'll leave me all aloooneeee!" I cooed. "oh what will I do without you, my prince?"

"And here I was, about to give a serious heartfelt goodbye." Josh deadpanned.

"Hah! This better not be goodbye!" I growled lightly into the phone. "I would expect to at least see you in person first!"

"Actually, that was why I called. I have to fly back tomorrow, and I was hoping to see you again before that."

"Were you? Well, as it turns out, Nightshade got my battle today canceled. Palmer made some excuse about not being properly 'prepared' after his defeat. Two days of work wasted, mind you."

"S-sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"Sorry? I didn't want to battle him!" I laughed. "I just wish you had told me you were gonna beat him three days ago, so I didn't have to study!"

Josh scoffed. "Oh, and I was supposed to know I would beat all fifty trainers, and Palmer himself?"

"You would beat them? Ooh, someone's getting cocky. I'm pretty sure those were my Pokémon in the arena, fighting for you."

"Technicalities, my dear." He laughed.

"So what were you planning tonight then?" I grabbed a messy strand of my hair, and twirled it around my finger.

"Well, I was hoping perhaps you could make me something at your place? I heard you make amazing lasagna." Josh purred.

"If I didn't know you better, I would punch you for that." I huffed.

Making fun of my cooking skills. I could make Lasagna if I tried! I would just need to go to the store first, and  
supplies.

Do I have any pans? Do you NEED pans for Lasagna?

"I kid, I kid. Where do you wanna go eat? I could go for some seafood." Josh offered.

"Oooh, I know a good place right by the sea. I'll say goodbye to everyone tomorrow when you leave, but tonight, let's have it just be

us. My treat?"

"Oooh, generous!"

"Just until you make it huge, and beat the Elite Four." I smirked.

"And until then, how can I ever repay your kindness?" Josh pleaded sarcastically.

"I'm sure you'll find a way." I grinned, and hung up the phone.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

A soft ocean breeze caressed me as I sat alongside the ocean. We both sat in a booth on a pier, overlooking the sea and the setting sun. The shadows of the fading light cast a warm, red glow on the sea, causing the now lavender ocean to shimmer with the sun's dying light. I couldn't have asked for a better sight.

Oh, and the ocean was pretty cool too.

"Stop looking at me like that." Sandy smirked, her face beginning to show the same signs of the cool setting sun. I grinned and dipped another massive shrimp into a small bowl of the restaurant's hot, reddish sauce.

"And how shall I look at you then, my dear?" I purred, nibbling on my shrimp, careful not to smear the sauce all over myself. Sandy opened her mouth to respond, then lowered her gaze in thought. I quickly snatched up another shrimp, dipped it quickly in horseradish, and tossed it expertly into her open mouth.

"Arrrrglph!" She recoiled, covering her mouth with her hand, and smearing horseradish all over her lips. After a moment, she composed herself and swallowed the shrimp, then hastily grabbed a napkin to wipe off her face.

"Josh, what the hell!?" She feigned an angry glare.

"Sorry, gut reaction." I giggled.

"Josh! We're in a restaurant!"

"So? We're the only one's here." I shrugged.

"I could have choked!"

"I know the Heimlich maneuver." I grinned, knowing I was slightly in trouble.

"And if that didn't work? What would you do, suck it out of me?"

"I do know mouth to mouthâ€¦" I trailed off.

"Oh do you?"

"Indeed."

"You may have lost your touch. How long has it been since your training?"

"A few months."

"You may have gotten rusty in that time. Are you so sure you could have saved me?" Sandy placed her elbows on the edge of the table, and leaned forward, gazing coquettishly at me with her aggressive copper eyes.

"I'd bet your life on it." I quipped.

"Show me." She breathed, leaning closer to me on the table. I was more than happy to comply, and leaned further against the table, and closed my eyes. Just then, a shooting pain erupted in my nose, and I recoiled in confusion and pain.

"Augh!" I shouted, my hand wiping at my nose, trying to clear the source of the pain. My hand felt something inserted inside my nose, and with one swift motion, yanked it out. A fresh wave of heat rushed up my nose, and I snorted red all across the back of my wrist.

Meanwhile, Sandy was beside herself with laughter, shaking the booth with her cackling. I angrily wiped my nose with my napkin as I pieced together what had occurred when my eyes were shut.

"You're face!" Sandy hooted between breaths.

"You shoved a shrimp in my nose!" I shouted. "I was vulnerable! I trusted you!"

"You totally deserved that." Sandy giggles proved infectious, and soon I was chuckling as well.

"How did I deserve that!?"

"You put a shrimp in me, I put a shrimp in you." She stuck out her tongue.

"It's not the same!"

"How is it not the same!?"

"You know how much horseradish \_burns \_when it's-" I was interrupted by another wave of laughter from sandy, as she doubled over in her seat.

"It was in your \_nose!\_" She squealed.

"You suck." I crossed my arms.

"You were \_trained \_in sucking." Sandy retorted. "Mouth to mouth, remember?"

"That doesn'tâ€|shut up!" I snickered, giving way to another bout of laughter. After a moment, we both slouched in our respective seats, and paused a moment to catch our breath. Sandy grabbed a shrimp and stirred it in the sauce reflectively, before giving way to a slight

sigh.

"Why does this have to end?" She asked nostalgically to the sauce.

"I'll be back. And you'll be back." I smiled, though my heart felt burdened.

"It's lonely with no one to throw shrimp at." Sandy grinned softly, her eyes turning the slightest bit misty.

"I'll be back, embarrassing you in public in no time." I promised, smirking, and wielding a shrimp threateningly.

Sandy slouched a bit, and gave me a tired smirk. "Just beat the Elite four already so you can get residence here."

I closed my eyes, and imagined life at the battle park. "Mmmm. But how would I get a house?" I hummed. "Housing is hard to come by in these partsâ€|"

"I'm sure \_someone \_would loan you a roomâ€|just until you get yourself on your feet, of course."

"Oh? And who might this kind person be?" I grinned. "Do I know them?"

Sandy rolled her eyes. "No, I'm sure you two have never met."

\* \* \*

><p>I gave an exaggerated sigh, and leaned back in my chair.<p>

"What?" Sandy's smile was replaced by a look of surprisingly genuine concern. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, it's nothingâ€|" I bit the inside of my lip to keep myself from grinning.

"Tell me!" She ordered, and kicked my shin from under the table. I have a small cry of unexpected pain, and relented.

"Well,â€|" I began, "â€|I suppose it's been a bitâ€|" I stopped, and attempted to gather my thoughts.

"Oh wait, are you actually serious? I thought we were kidding." Sandy gave me a worried look.

"Yeah, me too. I think it accidentally got serious." I smiled again, but it felt forced.

"What's up?" Sandy frowned.

"Lately with all of Static'sâ€|complications, and your job and allâ€|I feel a bit as if I didn't do a very good job doing what I came here to do, I suppose."

"What happened with Static wasn't your fault!" Sandy blurted.

"A-andâ€|you got the certificate. What else did you plan on

doing?"

I smiled lightly. "The whole reason I came here was because you choose to spend your tickets with me. In theory, I planned to return the favor by spending my time here with you."

Sandy looked relieved for a moment before recovering and throwing on a coy façade. "You assume I would \_want \_to spend time with youâ€|"

"Well, after the forest you didn't exactly seem \_disappointed.\_"

"I suppose you DO owe me for those ticketsâ€|" Sandy purred. "How do you propose you make it up to me?"

"I bought eggs." I smirked. "I'll make us breakfast tomorrow. Actual food. REAL food. I even bought a pan."

"Tempting offerâ€|" Sandy growled, glaring in a playful yet frustrated manner. "But that requires you to be there in the morning."

"Indeed it does. You see, my Visa expires tomorrow, which means I still must find a place to sleep tonight."

Unexpectedly, Sandy looked downwards at the table, as if to consider my proposition. This startled me somewhat â€" had I crossed the line? It wouldn't be as if this was the first time we had 'spent the night', but it would be the first time I was in her bed for the night. Was there some protocol I had failed to follow, or something I had forgotten, or missed?

"I-if you're uncomfortable sleeping together, it's okay!" I fumbled, "I'll just find the Pokémon Center down the road; it's free after all, and-"

Sandy squinted, and gave me a frustrated, yet flirtatious glaze. "Yeah. Like I'm uncomfortable sleeping with you. You caught me Josh." She rolled her eyes sarcastically.

"Well, you looked, um, concerned-"

"It was about something else." Sandy interrupted.

"What was it about?"

"Do you really think I can't cook?"

"No." I put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Noâ€|I know you can't cook."

"Oh shut up!" Sandy laughed, swatting my hand away.

"But seriously." I smirked. "What were you all mopey about?"

"Do you want to talk about that?" Sandy stood up, and moved to my seat, and sat down promiscuously on my pelvis. "Or do you want to get this?"

"Get this." My mouth sputtered automatically.

"Then get in my car." Sandy flashed her perfectionist smile. She and I stood up and retrieved her keys all in one swift motion. I followed her, excited for what the night had in store.

## 17. Good Vibrations

(Sandy POV)

With an uneven breath, suddenly I returned to consciousness. I sighed, recalling the memories from last night, and reached for Josh's warm, comforting presence.

But he wasn't there.

Of course he's not there.

Too many nights, I had awoken to a cold bed. Too many times I had arisen to the lack of companionship I craved. Perhaps it was my sarcasm, or the walls I placed around myself to stave off the inevitable pain of loss, but I had never truly had a lover. Though I enjoyed the sensual moments, it was the intimate moments I craved more. A phone call for no reason, or a hug in the dead of night. Gazing at the stars hand in hand, or a light kiss on a sad day; a reminder that not all was as abysmal as it seemed.

A small stain appeared on the sheets that I held between my fingers. I realized I was crying. He left. I always knew he would " the life of a Brain was always a lonely one. In truth, I could count my friends on one hand, and even then not use all the fingers. One of them I even owned, and I wasn't sure how much that counted. Pokémon could bond with anyone. They naturally formed empathetic bonds with their trainers, quickly adopting the trainer's hopes and dreams as their own. Does it count having a Pokémon as a friend, when they could be friends with anyone?

Josh.

More tears fell. I had only known him for a few short months, but already something kindled inside of me when I looked at him. I couldn't call it love " not yet " but feeling the smoldering of emotions inside me damper at the sight of his absence hurt me physically inside my chest. Having this relationship exist at this distance, where I wouldn't see him for weeks at a time already was difficult, but now that he would be gone.

for good.

I staggered to my feet, and steadied myself on the bedpost.

Priorities. Food. Then I see what work has planned. Maybe maybe I'll check to see if he's called by then. If he has well, I'll deal with that then. If not, I'll get Wiggly. She's harsh sometimes, but she'll be a good friend to have without.

Fruit. I took another whiff, and noticed the undeniable smell of fruit in the air. Confused and distraught, I stumbled into the living room.

"Hey sleepyhead!" Josh grinned, standing in front of the oven. "You didn't have cooking oil, but luckily I had something else up my sleeve." He purred, turning to me. "Have you ever tasted the delicacy that is-" Our eyes made contact. "Oh. A-are you alright, Sandy?"

I stood in quiet shock for a moment, catching my breath. I blinked a few times, if just to confirm he was there, then let out a sigh I didn't realize I had been holding.

"You're here." I stated, more to myself than to him.

"Yeah." He nodded, smiling sheepishly. "I made you bread."

"What?" I giggled softly.

"Check it out."

He opened the oven slightly, revealing a purple looking loaf. He grinning, and nudged me on the side.

"It's purple!" I exclaimed.

"Oops. Wasn't supposed to do that!" He laughed. "Just kidding. The berry determines the color. Ever had Oran bread?"

"I didn't even know you could put Oran berries in bread." I admitted.

"Well, then this will be even more special." He smiled, and hugged me. I returned the embrace, still shaking from the morning's revelation.

"Are you alright?" Josh repeated, keeping me in his arms.

"I guess I didn't expect to see you here this morning." I felt the hot tears begin to burn at the edge of my eyes once more.

Swiftly, he pressed his tender lips against mine; silencing the fears I had felt just a moment ago. After a moment we separated, and I took in a quick breath.

"What was that for?" I breathed.

"Didn't know what to say." He smirked, giving me another boyish shrug. "You know I'm not like that."

"You're one of few." My voice cracked as I finished the phrase.

"Let's talk over Orans." Josh nodded, looking around my kitchen. "I sense there's some stuff ya want to get off your chest. Now, um, where are your oven mitts?"

"Oven whats?"

"Mitts? Little mittens you grab the hot food with?" I shook my head, not understanding. Josh rolled his eyes playfully, and opened the oven. "It's fine, we'll let 'em cool naturally. More time to talk."

Josh pulled up a seat, and looked at me expectantly. I sighed, and pulled up one as well.

"I, um, I supposeâ€|guysâ€|haven't been known to always stick around in my life." I admitted, swallowing all the torrent of emotion that the simple phrase entailed. "Bâ€|but it's a long storyâ€|"

"I'm yours 'till nightfall." Josh gave me a reassuring beam.

\_I'm yoursâ€|\_

"W-wellâ€|" I began. "There's a reason I've never mentioned my fatherâ€|"

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

The light of the dying sun grazed my sleeping eyes, and I let out a warm, contented sigh. I didn't know what time it was, and as of now, I didn't care. I was relaxed, perfect in the pleasant canopy of leaves above us. Static lay curled by my side, snoozing contentedly in my shadow. Nova and Myst laid side by side, with Nova's flame flickering quietly. Skarr slept perched in a tree above, looking noble as ever despite his quiet rest.

The sun was setting on the Kanto shoreline. I admit I'm not usually one to take naps, but today I made a special exception. Skarr was a bit fatigued after our flight, and the rest of the group's sleeping schedules were thrown for a bit of a loop due to my rather sporadic use of the PokÃ©ball as of late. Overall, we were all a bit sleepy.

Talking to Sandy earlier wasâ€|opening. Once she started talking, I felt we really began to connect. She's very reserved, hiding behind the mask of strength and toughness to block her vulnerabilities. I supposed she had lived that way for so long even I believed she couldn't be hurt.

True to my word, we talked for hours. Cried a bit. Much of the afternoon and evening was spent in each other's arms, talking about life, and telling the other stories of ourselves. It's interesting revealing to another the less-than-perfect elements of one's self. Reveling the cracks and imperfections, instead of the polished, flawless faÃ§ade we all pretend we are.

In the end, we don't want someone that loves us for our masks. We want someone that loves us not despite our flaws, but who we are, strengths and weaknesses combined. Someone to make us stronger, and stand for us when we fall. Not someone to come to our sides when we need them, but someone who never leaves.

I managed to choke out that the awkward 'take care' at the hospital was a pathetic attempt at something more. She nodded in realization, and smiled gently.

I don't think either of us was ready to say what came next. Perhaps there was too much pain there for her, and perhaps it was too soon for me. We both sensed the other's apprehension, and agreed it was too soon for words that meant so much.



We talked longer, relishing each other's rare company, yet time for goodbyes came all too soon. Before I knew it I was flying into the late sun, waving goodbye against the eastern wind.

I looked up at the night sky. Our nap had turned into something more, and the bright moon made her appearance in the starless night. I smiled, content to let our naps turn into a blissful night sleep.

\* \* \*

><p>(Koga POV)<p>

The ever moving walls of my gym vibrated. They vibrated with every breath, and every step my apprentices made inside this hallowed ground. Some of them trained with different forms, and others with mediation, but the gym reverberated all the same. I saw my students, all diligent, becoming stronger with practice. I heard the sounds of their punches and strikes against one another as they sparred, preparing for conflict. I smelled the training mats, and the freshly cleaned glass walls - made in a way that to the normal eye, they appeared invisible. Students trained meticulously to see the walls; only through intense devotion could my disciples perceive them. It was the mark of a true warrior.

This I smelled, saw, and heard. And yet, it felt off. Wrong. I felt the vibrations of my students, myself, and my invisible walls. I felt the shudder of the florescent lighting, and the scratching of the carpet beneath my feet.

Yetâ€¦I felt something more.

"You attempt to surprise a master of Ninjusu." I smiled, eyeing an invisible force before me.

A rich laugh echoed through my gym, startling several of my students.

"\*\*\_You impress me Kogaâ€¦\_\*\*" The invisible entity purred. "\*\*\_I had believed the ways of old had disappeared eons ago. It pleases me that the ways of the shadows are still remembered.\_\*\*"

"The way of the Ninjusu is more than mere shadow." I chided.

"\*\*\_Mere?\_\*\*" The voice growled. Above me, a light flickered and went dark. "\*\*\_Mere shadow? You forget your place, Koga. You forget the darkness freely given to you and your kind, and the stealth of a moonless night.\_\*\*"

The room began to grow dark, and several of my students fled. One in the corner stood shaking, holding his smart phone at arm's length and recording the event.

"To whom am I addressing?" I spoke formally, hand cautiously on my blade.

"\*\*\_You may address me as NightShade.\_\*\*" The voice bristled. The shadows on the wall began to dance, all circling a single point. "\*\*\_The Penumbra grow restless at your mockery. We wish to challenge

your kind once more, and assert our dominance, lest you forget that only through us do your Ninjusu clans prosper.\_\*\*"

"Your victory will assure us of our ignorance, then? Is this what you plan to achieve?"

"\*\*\_I wish for respect for the night that has cloaked you all these years.\_\*\*" The timeless voice echoed. "\*\*\_And the badge, of courseâ€¦|\_\*\*"

"And if I shall win?"

"\*\*\_Then perhaps you have something to teach me: the endless eons of shadow.\_\*\*"

I smirked to myself. "It's been awhile since I've used the cover of the moon, restless ghost. Now I use other tactics. Are you sure you are prepared?"

"I am aware of the dangers you pose, Koga."

"Very well. Crobat! Silence this insolent shadow!"

"DarkBolt, force them to bow at our feet!"

A black Pikachu materialized out of shadows and produced a series of bright cyan electricity around his fierce, red cheeks. Eyeing his prey, a Crobat from the ceiling swooped down like a violet bullet. The Pikachu let out a primeval cry and a bolt of bright blue, missing his target but incinerating a ceiling tile to ash. The Pikachu summoned another bolt and screamed, the inside his mouth darker than all but the darkest of black.

"CHAAAAAA!"

\* \* \*

><p>(Static POV)<p>

\_[\_You know what to do, \_Darkbolt.]\_

\_Darkbolt. Hell yeah.\_

"Chrooooo!" The Crobat cried, diving at me with ridiculous speed. I let loose a bolt of electricity, but she swerved away with speed I had never before seen. My bolt missed by an embarrassing margin, and nearly toasted a light in the gym. Before I could even \_attempt \_to dodge her attack, she sliced me deeply across the side, turning my normally brown stripes a sickly lavender.

"Chu!" I streaked, and sent another bolt in retaliation. She curved sharply to the right, and once again my electricity failed me.

Koga shouted something incomprehensible, and suddenly the Crobat flipped â€" in midair â€" and flew back towards me with the same stupid speed it had before. It hit me again with \_something \_before I could flinch out of the way. I twisted around to get another clear shot, but the poison suddenly intensified, causing my vision to blur with odd colors and shapes.

Then it hit me. Aggression, repulsion, disgust, irritation, resentment, and distrust welled inside of me. I was so \_angry.\_ I didn't understand \_anything\_, \_and I couldn't see past the obscure walls of colors in front of myself. I clawed at the empty air in a fierce attempt to quell the fire burning inside of me. Unjustified rage coiling inside my chest, begging to be released in waves of-

[Do you trust me, friend of mine? Though the darkness, though the pain?]

-pure energy, that would pulse and smash against this unjust world! I would crush them all, destroy it all with fire and ice, and my electricity, andâ€|

[ Do you trust me, friend of mine? Though the darkness, though the pain?] A voice repeated in my mind. I remembered it before, before my anger. I remembered a response, from a long time agoâ€|how did it go?

[ Do you trust me, friend of mine? Though the darkness, though the pain?]

[I put my faith in you, my brother. To Hell, and back again.]

I blinked, and suddenly I could see. The poison still burned in my veins, but my rage was gone, and replaced by relief.

[Confuse Ray.] Josh answered the question before I even asked. [Wait until she gets close, then hit her when she can't turn away. You have this, \_Darkbolt\_.]

I centered all of my electricity around my fist and grinned. The Crobat looped around and dove straight at me, wind exploding off the tips of her wings and swirling around her like a massive bullet. Right before she collided with me, I smashed my electrified paw into her face.

Energy exploded around us as we fought for our attacks. Crobat's speed and wind pulsed around her as she struggled against my fist. Electricity pulsed out of my cheeks as I ground my teeth, forcing my fist against her shield of wind. For a perfect second we were at an impasse. The force of my punch matched with the strength of my lightning perfectly matched the force of Crobat's attack. Thenâ€|slowlyâ€|my fist inched its way closer, breaking the winds protecting Crobat's face.

Time seemed to slow as the impasse was broken, and my fist crunched against the Crobat's muzzle. The colors and distorting poison melded again into my brain, but I resisted its influence, and carried out the punch. After a moment to collect myself, I saw Crobat crumbled against one of the walls, clearly unconscious.

[Return.] Josh said quietly, with a hint of pride in his voice. Like his loyal shadow, I took my place along his side.

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

"Muk! Avenge Crobat, and show him what it truly means to be a Ninjusu!"

"\*\*\_Starvoid, end this silly charade.\_\*\*"

"Chaaa!" I yelped, standing a few yards away from the Muk, and trying my best to look intimidating. I couldn't see it, but all my color was gone, and replaced with a smooth, elegant black sheen. The glow from my tail was still there, but the flame itself was black, giving an eerie and mystic feel.

"Muk, use Toxic!"

[Nova, dodge it and use Outrage!] I instantly knew to jump up to avoid the poison, but his command caught me off guard, and I fumbled the jump.

"Chhh-" I hesitated, as a wave of poison sailed above me, hitting the exact place I would have jumped. [I, uh, I don't know how!]

[What?] Josh blinked.

[I-I don't know how to do that! I did it once, but it just kind of \_happened\_; I didn't cause it!]

[Of course you caused it! Only you can control yourself.]

[I \_know \_I caused it, just-] A large purple fist clocked me on the side of my face, and sent me sprawling to the floor.

[Focus! I had the same problem with Static when he first learned Hidden Power, trust me.] Josh advised. [Some attacks are based off emotion. His trigger was stillness and meditation. I think yours is confidence.]

[Then what do I do!?] I gulped, as I narrowly avoided another semi-liquid purple fist.

[Believe in yourself. I believe in you, as do we all. Now you believe in you.]

I took a deep breath, and focused on growing the multicolored claws again. I relived the experience in my mind; knowing that I could beat him. I concentrated on that feeling, and rushed at the Muk.

"Chaaa!" I screamed, and smashed my fist sunk into his putrid exterior.

I didn't have claws.

With one quick motion, the Muk engulfed me, swirled me around his insides, and spat me back out onto the field. I choked, feeling the all too familiar effects of both the poison rushing inside me, and the acid burning against my skin.

\_How \*\*dare\*\* it eat me.\_

I pushed the weird thought aside as I stood up again to signal I hadn't faintedâ€¦yet.

[You weren't confident enough.] Josh shook his head. [You have to believe in yourself, completely, undoubting.]

[I did! I felt it, I \_knew \_I could, honest, it just didn't work!]

[Try it once more; I know you can do it!]

The Muk struck at me again sending acidic purple splatters against the gym floor. I sidestepped him quickly, but I knew I didn't have much farther to run.

\_It truly thinks it can win.\_

I shook my head, trying to clear these distracting odd thoughts before it occurred to me. The feeling before at the grass gym just confidence, it was invulnerability. It wasn't the knowledge that I \_could\_ win, it was the knowledge that I \_couldn't\_ help but win\_.

"CHA!" I screamed, as bright, multicolored claws shot out of my paw and deflected the Muk's next strike. I smashed my other fist directly against the Muk again, and instead of sinking in, it crashed against it and sent the glob flying across the gym.

I wiped the residual acid off myself, and walked casually to the other side of the gym, ignoring the poison eating through me.

[You think I'm weak?] I asked the Muk as it strained to continue to coagulate. [\*\*\_It's a dangerous game to underestimate the dragons, my foe\_.\*\*]

[What do you know about dragons, half-breed?] The Muk spat back. [You have an attack; you think that makes you special? That your trainer bought you a shiny new TM, and that somehow makes you a dragon?]

I reached inside the Muk, grabbed \_something\_, and hoisted it into the air.

[\*\*\_When I summon pillars of flame from my mouth, and command the air with my mighty wings, yes, I will be a true dragon. Until thenâ€¦consider me in training.\_\*\*] I tossed him across the gym, where he met the ground with a satisfying smack.

"Returnâ€¦|" Koga spat bitterly.

[\*\*\_Plusâ€¦|\_\*\*] I continued, the intensity of my claws dulling, and the brightness leaving my eyes. [It's not like any of us aren't 'half-breeds' anymore. If you consider yourself pure, it's probably just 'cause you forgot who your grandpa is.]

[Exactly!] Static yelped from the sidelines. [It's been like a hundred years! Who can stay in the same species for that long!?!]

[Static.] Josh deadpanned. [We've been around for thousands years.]

[Whatever, I forgot a zero.] Static rolled his eyes. [And zeros are worthless anyway. My point stands.]

[I've waited patiently, Josh. Is it yet my turn toâ€¦?] Skarr questioned, annoyed.

[Let's wait to see what Koga-]

"Go, Weavile!" Koga shouted, summoning his third and last PokÃ©mon.

[Yeah, you're up.] Josh nodded.

18. Cold blooded, warm bodied

(Skarr POV)

"Go, Bladed Shadow!"

"Skraaaaa!" I screeched, soaring into the air. Myst had truly outdone herself yet again; the illusion she placed upon me was flawless. The light reflected perfectly against my darkened exterior, casting aspects of light all across the gym. To my delight, she kept the sinew between my wings the same color, and matched my eyes to show the same emotionless scarlet. That scarlet was the only respite to my otherwise completely dark façade. Truly, I was a sight to behold.

[Skarr, use toxic!]

[What else would you have me do?] I chuckled. [Wait it out? Increase my defenses, and keep roosting until it runs out of power p-]

"Kah!" The Weavile screeched, sending a bolt of pure ice shooting from her open mouth. The beam caught me by surprise and hit me beneath my wing in my tender reddish flesh.

[AAAAUGH!] I mentally screamed, banking fiercely to the right in an attempt to stay airborne despite my injury.

[Skarr!] Josh yelled from the sidelines, [Are you alright!?]

[I thought it used melee attacks!] I howled as I lost altitude, attempting to use my crippled wing despite its apparent uselessness.

[Can you take another hit!?] Josh pleaded. I could feel a part of his mind racing with calculations.

[I-Iâ€¦] I stumbled.

[Skarr, return!]

[No Josh, I can fight through it, I can-]

[Skarr, \_return.\_] Josh ordered. I cringed as I flew back, where I was met with the reprimanding red glow of my pitch black ultraballâ€¦

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

"Even the darkness has its faults, it appears."

I bit my lip, formulating a strategy. Both static and Nova weren't at full strength, and Myst was weak to fighting. Bad combination.

"We haven't got all day, Dark One." Koga mocked. "Or rather, I suppose you do. Once this is all over, do you just go and lie under a tree, filling your place as a meaningless shadow?"

[Nova.] I addressed my timid Charmeleon. He looked up surprised. [I need you to trust me, okay?]

[I already trust you?] Nova gave me a confused look.

[I'm going to send you out, and you're going to do your best, using ember, alright?]

[Not Outrage?]

[Not this time.] I sighed, already regretting my actions, although I knew them to be necessary. [Are you ready?]

[Butâ€¦I'm already hurt.] Nova hesitated, looking at me for reassurance.

[I know.] I nodded. [But I need you to trust me, okay?]

[Okay Josh. I trust you.]

[Okay.] I took a deep breath. "Go, Starvoid!"

"Meleon!" Nova charged forward valiantly, instantly getting smashed by a beam of ice meant for Skaarr. Nova shook off the blow, and sent a shower of sparks at the Weavile. The Weavile cringed at the attack, and retaliated with a sharp kick, hitting the side of Nova's face, and sending him harshly into the ground.

He didn't get back up.

Wordlessly, I returned Nova to his ultraball.

[D-did you do that on purpose?] Myst asked incredulously.

[Don't question him!] Static spat. [He only does that stuff when he has to!]

[I-I'll explain later.] I shuddered, grinding my teeth. [Are you ready Static?]

[Ready for anything.] He answered fiercely.

[Fake out, then thunderbolt, alright?]

[Got it.]

"Go, Darkbolt!" I cried, as Static leapt forward at the Weavile. His shadowed form raced across the gym, meeting the Weavile far before she was ready.

"Pikah!" Static shouted, smashing his paws in front of the Weavile. The Weavile flinched back in surprise, but quickly gathered her wits and countered with the same sharp kick that took down Nova.

Static slid across the floor. At one moment he attempted to use his momentum to flip backwards, but he fumbled, and crashed back onto the ground.

[Static!] I shouted, terrified.

"Kahâ€|" Static stubbornly growled, lifting himself up on one meager paw.

\_Hang in there, Staticâ€|\_

"Weavile, finish this pathetic shadow." Koga smirked. The Weavile was happy to comply, racing towards her weakened foe. Static looked up, his eyes weary, but filled with grudging, fierce determination. He wore a weak grin on his pained face, almost daring the Weavile to believe the fight was over.

"CHAAAAA!" He screamed, just as the Weavile was upon him, sending every volt he had into the unsuspecting Weavile. The Weavile convulsed with energy before landing upon the floor, unconscious.

"Châ€|Chaâ€|" Static panted, forcing himself to stand on all fours.

Koga stood at the polar side of the gym, his expression pleased, yet puzzled.

"I have underestimated you." He began, his hands folded behind his back. "Perhaps we were only successful with our shadow's guidance."

"No." I answered. Koga shot me a confused glance. "You and your protÃ©gÃ© were successful because of your discipline and skill. To you, the shadows were but a tool; one of many in your arsenal."

"â€|You confuse me." Koga frowned. "If you do not wish to humble me, why have you come?"

"I simply wish for the badge, a symbol that you have not forgotten the darkness. A freely given tool for those with the intellect to use it."

Koga handed me the badge, never breaking his gaze from my own.

"In my ancestryâ€|" He began, "There was a legend of one's own shadow. A being you must never meet, lest it be your undoing." I felt his unsteady gaze. "However, it is said, with training, you could control such a beast. Alasâ€|I do not feel in control." Koga frowned. "Are you my shadow?"

"I am no one's shadow." I smirked, and left the gym.

\* \* \*



><p>"Here you are, sir. Enjoy you day."<p>

"Thank you." I smiled, collecting my Pok  balls from the kind nurse.  
"You too."

I stepped outside, and for a brief moment, admired the silence around me. The calm Fuchsia wind tussled against my orange hair, and tugged gently against my red jacket.

With a light toss and a flash of scarlet, Nova appeared before me. He glanced around himself in confusion, before sickening realization crossed his face. Big tears began forming at the corner of his eyes, and he cupped his paws around his mouth in horror.

[Nova, don't-]

[\_ohmygodohmygodohmygod!\_] Nova hyperventilated, crying into his hands. [I fainted, didn't I!?!]

[Don't worry about-] I tried to say, but his intense emotions made communicating telepathically difficult.

[I let everyone down!] He sobbed. [Everyone lost because of me...]

[Nova.] I thought sternly, breaking into his storm of anguish. [I want you to take a deep breathe, okay?]

[What good would it do? I'm still a-]

[Nova.] I interrupted. [Please. For me.]

Nova drew a shaky breath.

[We won, okay?] I smiled, encouragingly. [We won the badge.]

[Oh.] Nova smiled sadly. [Well, that's good. No thanks to me, though  ]

[\_All\_ thanks to you.] I corrected.

[You don't have to be nice to me; I know I screwed up. That ember didn't even do anything  ]

[Can I tell you a secret?] I implored, kneeling down to Nova's eye level.

[What?] The Charmeleon wiped his eyes with one paw, gazing at me with interest.

[Your ember did a lot.] I commended. [But you did even more than that.]

[Yeah, I fainted  ] Nova sighed.

[Yep.] I nodded, approvingly. [And you won us the badge.]

[Huh?]

[I didn't just need the Ember.] I confessed. [I needed someone to take the ice beam attack \_and \_the fighting move. Skarr was too fatigued, Myst had a weakness to fighting, and Static was only strong enough to take one hit. Without you to take the blow, we would have lost.]

[Soâ€¦you wanted me to faint?] Nova asked, confused.

I sighed. Explaining my strategy was complicated. It took several sessions with Static before he understood, and even now I think he understands it more as an 'Okay, I trust you', then an actual strategic move. Still, I had to-

[OH! I get it! I'm like the Bishop!] Nova blurted, interrupting my thoughts.

[Um, what?] I stumbled.

[L-like in chess!] Nova shook excitedly. [When you need to sacrifice a piece to get a checkmate! Sacrificing one piece to win the game!]

I blinked. [Yeah. That's, um, that's exactly what I meant.]

[Hah.] Nova beamed at his understanding.

\_How the hell does he know about chess?\_

[How do you know what chess is?] my mouth echoed my thoughts.

[Before you adopted me, I watched a lot of T.V.] Nova shrugged. [I learned to play with a few PokÃ©mon that didn't get adopted either. It was fun.]

I knew that the center was a difficult topic for him, so I approached it with caution. [What were your friends like?] I asked hesitantly.

[They were fun. More brave than I was. Well, maybe not Bulbasaur.] Nova chuckled to himself, but the joke was lost on me. [But definitely Squirtle. He was a bit headstrong, always being on the offense, and sending his queen after me first. I think that's how he handled his sickness.]

[Sickness?] I inquired.

Nova shifted uncomfortably. [The reason we were all left is because there was something wrong with us all. Like, genetic level stuff. Mine, of course, who wants a coward dragon, you know? Squirtle was that he was an experiment. They wanted to see if they could breed a Blastoise with a Shenninja, to get a Squirtle with some kind of special ability or something. They didn't succeed, but they did breed one with only one hitpoint. It's sadâ€¦he really likes battling, but with the smallest hit he faints. Just like that.]

[That's terrible.] I frowned.

[Yeah. Sometimes I let him win, just because I think losing all the time would be sad.] Nova admitted. [Honestly though, I liked playing

Bulbasaur more. He didn't play much though.]

[Was he any good?]

[Amazing!] Nova yelped excitedly. [I would \_always \_lose, well, when we finishedâ€¦] Nova looked at the ground nostalgically.

[Why didn't you always finish?] I asked.

[Bulbasaur had really bad allergies. He was allergic to the bulb on his back, and it was always releasing pollen. It was kind of funny at first, before you realized how bad it was. He had to take medication constantly, and even that didn't help too much. He was so self-conscious about it.] Nova sighed. [He would have allergy attacks sometimes, and he would have to leave. Usually I wouldn't see him for the rest of the day.]

[Ouch.]

[Yeah.] Nova exhaled.

[And you all learned chess from television?]

[Yeah! It taught us other games too. There was another with tablets that we liked playing, and we all played it together. The tablets were super thin, and they all had weird markings on them. You had to match them with different combinations.]

[â€¦Mahjong?] I asked incredulously.

[No, no. We played it together, I just can't remember the name.] Nova struggled. [It was hard because people were allowed to, like, lie with their faces. And you would bet stuff sometimes, but we would always give it back.]

[â€¦Card games!] I laughed in realization. [You watched professional Poker!]

[That's it!] Nova chirped in excitement. [That's what they called it! Poke-her!]

[Poker, yeah.] I grinned [Oh, man. You and I'll have to play a game sometime.]

[I'd like that.] Nova smiled earnestly.

[Alright. Let's send out the gang and plan our next strategy, alright?]

[Okay!] Nova hummed. With a content sigh on my lips, I unclipped the other three ultraballs from my side.

\* \* \*

><p><em>I think I broke Static.<em>

Static stood a few feet away from me, engrossed in deep thought. His forehead was wrinkled in a way I had never seen, and his chin met his paw at a comedic angle.

Previously, I had asked the group whether they would like smoothies now (a treat for beating the gym) or bigger smoothies if they beat a second gym today. I enjoyed progress, but I also didn't want to push them too hard.

Nova didn't mind. Of course. Myst quickly mentioned she didn't mind either, right after Nova. I thought she may have been a bit worried about Sabrina's gym and impressing me, so I made a mental note to encourage her later.

Skarr looked bored, and eloquently mentioned his distaste for smoothies. I laughed and offered to catch a Ratatta for him, but he declined and turned away.

Lastly we had Static. His tiny mind seemed at an impasse â€" instantaneous reward, or a bigger reward in the near future? I could almost see the smoke coming out of his ears.

Static bit his tongue quizzically. [How far away is the gym?]

[To me and Skarr? I asked. [Maybe an hour or two. To you it'll feel like seconds. PokÃ©ball stasis.]

[So we're \_not\_ walking.] Static clarified.

[Yes, we're not walking.]

Static went back into deep thought. Skarr looked away, annoyed, while Myst smirked knowingly. Nova was the only one waiting patiently. Self included.

[I like gymsâ€¦] Static muttered to himself. [\_And \_big smoothiesâ€¦]

[I'd like it if you made up your mind.] Myst grinned.

[Shhh, I'm thinking.] Static waved off Myst dismissively.

[It's a rare sight; it may take a while.] I chuckled. Myst snorted a laugh, and Nova smiled quietly.

[Hush.] Static ordered, still in deep contemplation. He took a deep breath. [Okay, I want the bigger smoothie.] He nodded.

[Such emotional maturityâ€¦] Skarr droned, more cynically than usual. I frowned.

[Alright! I made my choice!] Static chirped, suddenly impatient. [Put me in stasis! I only want to come out if I'm fighting, or if we're at the smoothie place!]

[Alright, alright. Everyone else is okay with this?]

[Yup.] Nova nodded.

[Sure.] Myst replied, shortly after Nova.

[Alright, see you guys in a second.] I affirmed, sending Static and Nova into their respective PokÃ©balls.

[Myst.] I singled out. Myst gave me a puzzled, but attentive stare. [You're gonna wipe the floor with these guys. Don't worry.]

[I'm not.] Myst shook her head as if to banish the thought. [â€|worried.]

[If you are, it's understandable.] I assured. [This is the first gym where we're relying heavily upon you. I know you'll do great, but it's also a large responsibility.]

Myst winced, and shifted from paw to paw. [â€|If I faint, I won't be able to keep the Nightshade illusion up.] She admitted. [Everyone will know it's you.]

[You won't faint.] I promised. [And even if you do, so what? Sabrina can probably see through illusions anyway, and unlike with Koga, it won't be televised.]

\_Not sure if a dork with a smartphone counts as 'televised', butâ€|\_

[Okay.] She nodded, breathing a sigh of relief. [â€|Thanks.]

[Don't mention it.] I smiled, pulling out her ultraball.

[See you at the gym.] She grinned as she disappeared into the red light.

[Ready?] Skarr's sighed.

[Nope!] I smirked, mounting him carefully to avoid his bladelikey wings. [I want to take a detour.]

\* \* \*

><p>[It's not that I feel the need to hide my emotionsâ€|] Skarr attempted to explain as we soared over the beautiful Fuchsia Valley. [I suppose I feel as if it's mundane. Everyone has these emotions, and it's petty.]<p>

[People are petty for having emotions?] I prodded.

[â€|People are petty for being overly \_influenced \_by emotion.] Skarr articulated.

There was a pregnant pause.

[You're upset about being upset.] I concluded.

Skarr gave a hollow laugh. [You make it seem so simple.]

[Life is simple.] I smiled into the wind. [It's people that overcomplicate it.]

[Perhaps.] Skarr sighed wearily.

[What's bothering you, Skarr?]

[â€|Justâ€|myself. Being foolish, andâ€|] He trailed off.

[What do you mean?]

[I could have dodged.] Skarr sighed again, closing his eyes. [I should have dodged.]

Suddenly, he reminded me of Nova.

[The battle?] I deducted.

[More than that!] He growled, though more at himself than at me. [I was an idiot. Overconfident; full of hubris. Thought I was invincible. Nearly cost us the battle. Made poor Nova faint. If it weren't for your-]

[Hey.] I interrupted. [It was as much my fault as yours. I was enjoying your banter.]

['Banter'?] Skarr questioned.

[The way you phrase things. Your witty retorts, and your sarcastic jabs. Deadpan remarks.]

[You're saying \_I \_distracted \_you\_?]

I smirked, a paused to collect myself. [I'm saying maybe with both made a mistake, but it turned out alright. We both learned, and we'll do better next time.]

[â€|Okay.]

We continued to fly around for a bit further.

[Did you mean it?] Skarr prodded, after a long silence.

[Mean what?]

[About my witty remarks and sarcastic deadpans and all that?]

[Yeah. It's you; it's who you are. And I like you.]

[All this timeâ€|I guess I just thought I was white noise.]

[Naw! You'reâ€|] I struggled to find the right word.

[I'm what?]

[You do yourself a \_gracious \_disservice, as one of the prestigious, and honored Skarmory.] I laughed, mimicking Skarr.

[I most \_certainly \_do not sound anything like that rubbish!] Skarr countered with mock anger.

[You do it better than me.] I grinned. Skarr turned to give an annoyed smirk before he resumed his flight.

[So I simply \_amuse \_you, is that it? A flying steed upon which you can mock?]

[Yup, that's pretty much it.] I laughed.

[You're lucky I love you.] Skarr growled ,laughing with his amber eyes.

[That I am.] I smiled into the wind.

\* \* \*

><p>[You're so <em>warm.<em>]

[Uh, What?] I fumbled.

We had flown in comfortable silence for quite some time, and this was our first odd interaction since.

[We Skarmory are actually cold-blooded, you know.] Skarr explained.

[Oh. That's, uh, that's interesting.]

[I'm just feeling the heat radiating from your thighs. It's heavenly.] Skarr purred.

[Oh god. Skarr, don't make this weird.] I groaned.

[I don't know what you're talking about.] Skarr grinned evilly. [I'm not uncomfortable here.]

I bit my lip.

[There's a special bond between rider and mount, you know?] Skarr continued, despite my obvious cringing.

I groaned a bit louder.

[You move your heated human body across my cool metallic feathers, directing me across the windâ€¦] Skarr hummed.

[Stoppppppâ€¦|.] I begged.

[We're like lovers, you and I.] Skarr giggled. [Knowing each other's forms intimately, and responding to each other's motions in kind. Like an intricate dace across each other's bodies.]

[What do you waaant!?] I whined.

[Mango.] Skarr turned to grin at me mischievously, his amber eyes flashing colors of the setting sun. [I want a smoothie as well.]

[All that for a smoothie?] I shuddered, and rolled my eyes.

[What!?] Skarr yelped, feigning outrage. [I meant everything I said. Our bodies moving as oneâ€¦|]

[Land, you creep.] I laughed. I could scarcely make out Sabrina's gym in the distance.

[I feel used.] Skarr pouted then laughed as he swooped towards the gym.

\* \* \*

><p>[SMOOOOOOOOOOOOTHIE TIIIIIME!]<p>

I blushed slightly as the cashier chuckled at my predicament. A small army of PokÃ©mon stood behind me, only moments before arguing and wondering which flavor they should get. Static was currently racing around my feet, Pokespeak on full blast, shouting in impatient excitement for his promised large smoothie.

"Honestly, we get this all the time." The woman smirked. She was middle-aged, and had the tired grin of someone who had worked in the service industry for far too long.

"Thank you regardless." I met her tired smirk with my own, and paid for the drinks.

It had been a \_long \_day, but I was happy. Myst had done superbly of course, completely obliterating Sabrina. It took three moves to finish the game against Sabrina's three PokÃ©mon. The only scare was when her last PokÃ©mon, Alakazam, used Focus Blast before Myst could attack. Luckily the attack missed, and Myst was able to finish him off with one last, easy Dark Pulse.

Two badges, one day. A rare feat. I smiled in our accomplishment while I drank a mixture of some foul concoction I had allowed my PokÃ©mon to mix me. Something about mango and kiwi with vanillaâ€¦something. Cake?

Static sat happily, slurping his Bannanaâ€¦Bonzo, or Bang, or some alliteration. Skarr awkwardly fiddled with his straw with his wing as he consumed his Mangoâ€¦Mania, I think it was. Nova drank Blueberry Burst, along with Myst, which they both enjoyed.

Despite my accomplishment â€" our accomplishment â€" somehow I felt as if something was missing. It scratched at my consciousness awkwardly, as if not actually wanting me to notice, like a shy wallflower at a dance. I tried my best to ignore this feeling; it seemed wrong. My PokÃ©mon couldn't get wind of it certainly; this was the night of celebration; doing the near impossible! I should be\_proud\_of them and in an incredible mood, instead of lukewarm with this odd feeling in my mind.

I threw on my best smile, and we celebrated long into the night. Skarr even had a laugh or two, at my expense of course. We shared stories by campfire light, and giggled long after the moon shared in our mirth, high in the sky. By the nights end, I had all forgotten about the weird feeling in my mind, and I had enjoyed myself completely.

But as I shifted into my sleeping bag, it emerged once more. Unease, as if something was missing. I gave a frustrated sigh into my sleeping bag before something odd tickled my leg.

I reached the odd spot and found my cellphone buzzing. I flinched out of my sleeping bag, and quietly crawled away to a secluded spot before answering.

"â€¦Hello?" I asked, my voice sounding slightly sleep-deprived.



"Oh, shit, sorry. Were you sleeping?" A concerned voice on the other end rang out. Sandy.

"Naw, not yet. I was just getting in, though."

"You were still awake at this hour?"

"Said the teapot to the kettle."

"I have a good reason!" Sandy pouted.

"And I don't?" I mocked. "Cause, you know, I'm just twiddling my thumbs over here, not like, \_knocking out two gyms in one day.\_"

Sandy whistled into her phone. "Damn. What are you on then? Four badges? Five?"

"Six!" I grinned. "Two more, then the league. Well, Victory Road, then the league." I shuddered, thinking of the Cave.

"Don't worry about it." Sandy seemed to sense my apprehension. "You're the best battler I've seen \_not\_ at the Battle Park. You'll make it."

\_They called the Caves 'the culling'. The best make it to the cave. Only the best of the best make it through.\_

"Yeah, I-I'll be fine." I waved off my fear, swallowing it for another day. "I'm sure."

"Anyway, that's not why I calledâ€|" Sandy trailed off, a smile on her lips.

"Oh? What's up?"

"What's up?" She mocked in a lower tone. "You know!"

"Don't play this game, just tell me." I whined.

"Your birthday! Finally turning eighteen, and you stop being jailbait."

"Oh yeah. What day is today? OH, is it tomorrow?" I yelped excitedly.

"Technically it \_is\_ tomorrow, so yes." Sandy laughed.

"Wait, my birthday? What?"

"No, the time. Like, it's so late it's literally \_tomorrow.\_"

"â€|Huh?"

I heard the sound of Sandy smacking her forehead on the phone. "Your birthday. It's today. But it's also like 2am, so it'll feel like it's tomorrow. Happy birthday!"

"Oh. Man you make things confusing." I laughed. "And thanks! Wha'd ya

get me?"

"Well, I pulled a few stringsâ€¦" Sandy purred into her cell. "â€¦and I miiiight get a chance to fly down their tomorrow. I have a few battles planned in the morning, and this is **\*\*\_not\_\*\***for-sure thing yetâ€¦"

"I understand."

"â€¦but I might be able to swing coming to hang with you tomorrow night. Maybe. If not tomorrow the next day for sure, okay?"

"Yeah, that sounds great." I smiled.

"Alright. That's all, just wanted to wish you a Happy B-" Suddenly the phone made a terrible sound, like a cat being slowly run over by a truck.

"Augh!" I groaned once the noise stopped. "What was that!?"

"What was what?"

"Augh, I thought that was your end!" I rubbed my ear in pain. "Some weird sound."

"Oh, no, I was just wishing you a Happy Birthday."

"Aughâ€¦" I looked at my phone dubiously. "Huh. Well, thanks!"

"No problem. See you tomorrow hopefully!"

"See you!" I smiled and hung up the phone.

A notification blinked alive as soon as I ended the phone call, with the phrase 'Happy Birthday' in the title. I sighed in realization â€œ someone, or rather, some\_mon \_must have changed my notification ping to that awful sound. My money was on Static. Satisfied with my realization, I opened up the notification.

"Congratulations on being 21 years young!" The message read happily. I smirked at the advertisement, remembering how I had deliberately fudged my age, all those years ago. "You and your best party of six are invited to the grand PokÃ©mon Pageant, showing off only the best in entertainment and glamor! Show off your stuff, or admire others â€œ either way, we hope to see you there!"

"Static's going to have a coronary." I grinned, and closed my phone with a snap.

\* \* \*

><p>(Overdose POV)<p>

Florescent lights stared back at me with the same dull intensity I gazed at them. Bed, five by two. Window, two by two. White everything. Mandated food, water. Exercise. Tests.

I hated this place. This hell. The word 'facility' fell off my tongue like a plague, staining the very floor it fell upon with its filth. They kept me locked in this governmental cage and they have

the audacity to claim there's something wrong with \_me\_.

Hours spent staring at the lights, with my back pressed against the hard, unforgiving mattress. My tail flicking back and forth, bending the electricity of the lights to my whim.

On.

Off.

On.

Off.

Onâ€¦

Suddenly, the door cracked open. I looked up with annoyed curiosity as Volt strolled in, and took his place in the second bed in this hellish room. He bounced on his mattress before looking at me with a disappointed gaze.

"We, uhâ€¦" Volt fumbled, unsure of how to begin. "We missed you today, 'Dose. Me and the othersâ€¦"

I looked away, frustrated.

"We played dodge ball. They let us have real balls and everything!" Volt chirped excitedly, before realizing who he was talking to. "â€¦Itâ€¦it was fun. I wished you were there. Youâ€¦ you would have liked it."

"It's like you don't even know why we're here." I hissed.

"What?"

"They think we're \_broken.\_" I growled. "They think they can \_fix\_ us."

Volt remained silent, and stared at the floor.

"Keep us locked in here long enough and it will break our will to be ourselves." I sighed, shuddering at the thought.

"I meanâ€¦" Volt began, shrugging. "We are \_kind \_of broken, aren't we?"

"\*\*\_What!?!\_\*\*" I screamed, grabbing him by his neck, and hoisting him into the air.

"Iâ€¦" He knew better than to struggle, and simply submitted himself to my torment. "I mean, why else would we be here, right? Normal people don't like hurting others. Normal people don't put \_poison \_in themselves, or break each other's bones 'cause they think it's funny."

"You're saying I'm not \_normal?\_"

"I'm sayingâ€¦" Volt squirmed, and I released him. "I'm saying, what

if? What if they are just trying to help, you know? What if we are messed up; what if we are broken?"

"There is nothing wrong with what I am!" I shouted, point blank into Volt's face. "They will not fix me. They will not change me. THAT is who I am, THAT is who I always will be, and I refuse to change." I jumped back on my bed.

"Overdoseâ€|" Volt's voice cracked as he whimpered.

"I'll die before I change." I nodded to myself. "They'll never change who I am."

\* \* \*

><p>[We have to <em>what.<em>] Static deadpanned, glaring at me as if daring me to be serious.

[It'll be fun!] I smiled. Static grimaced. I smiled wider. He growled. [Come on.] I begged. [New experience, widened horizons-]

[I have to agree with Static on this one, Josh.] Skarr sighed. [This pageant business sounds pathetic and demeaning.]

[It's fun!] I exclaimed. [Static, remember how awesome acting out 'Into The Woods' was at my school?]

[â€|Kinda.] Static reluctantly responded.

[This is the same thing!]

[It's a bunch of dressed up purebreds pretending they can battle.] Skarr scoffed.

[This one's different.] I looked Skarr in the eyes. [Honestly. They judge the utilization and power of moves, and their application to the opponents. It's like battling, but you're getting judged on your performance.]

[We always get judged on our performance. It's called winning.] Static retorted. I sighed, and put my hand to head.

[W-well I think it sounds fun!] A voice behind me chirped. Nova stood supportively behind me, and hugged my pant leg.

[â€|Thank you, Nova.] I complemented, albeit reluctantly.

[I'm willing to try new things.] Myst purred, whipping her tail at Static before quickly pulling it back. [Unlike some.]

Static growled loudly. [Just because I don't want to be paraded around-]\_

[Guys!] I warned.

[Static, we're outvoted.] Skarr grumbled bluntly. [Plus some culture wouldn't be abominable for us. Let us make the most of what we can.]

[Auuuuughhhhâ€|] Static whined.

[Look. They probably won't even give us an important role.] I assured the group. [We'll probably be the fight in the intermission, between the really good high-scoring fights. We'll mostly be watching really cool effects and moves, and who doesn't like that, right?]

[Rightâ€¦] My group droned back at me. I bit my lip.

[Well, in any case, our part will be minor.] I gulped. [It'll be fine.]

\* \* \*

><p>"The lead!?"<p>

"We don't get many applicants, sir. You'll be our first battler with six badges in months." The receptionist spoke honestly. "Most battlers have two or fewer. Normally we would've had to call in a favor to get someone so skilled to fight for our entertainment. As luck would have it though, another trainer just stopped by, only slightly less skilled than yourself."

"Wow. How can you tell?" I asked, curious.

"Um, number of badges?" The receptionist gave me an odd look.

"Oh. Right."

"Anyway, here's a pamphlet." The receptionist handed me a piece of folded paper. "This should be what you need to work off of. What moves give you the most point value, and what the judges normally look for. You'll be on at eight p.m. tomorrow."

"I'll be there..." I assured as I turned away, glancing over the pamphlet.

[What'd she say?] Static pestered as I left the building.

[Well, actuallyâ€¦] I turned to the group. [They, um, they kind of think we're hot stuff. They want to make us the lead.]

[So \_you're \_the guy who stole my spot.] A voice entered my Pokespeak I didn't recognize. I whipped around to see a blond haired trainer clutching a PokÃ©ball by the entrance. He stood slightly smaller than me at around 5'6", and wore a dark blue jacket. His dulled blue eyes had large, deep circles around them.

[You know,] He continued. [I thought I had that lead under wraps. Almost no one attends these things anymore, and I figured I'd snatch the lead, and introduce my PokÃ©mon to the spotlight.]

[I didn't mean any disrespect.] I fumbled.

['Course you didn't.] The man shrugged, spinning a PokÃ©ball on the tip of his finger. [Name's Ethan, by the way. And I \_am \_going to have to battle you for that spot. My role against yours, three on three.]

[Um, Josh.] I said after a moment of confusion. [And you can just

have it, I don't think we really even want-]

[Deal!] Static cried excitedly, his cheeks sparking with electricity.

\_Well. I guess we're battling.\_

[Go, Bolt!] The man cried, releasing an experienced looking Pikachu.

[Get 'em, Static!] I grinned, slightly baffled, sending my own Pikachu right back at him.

## 19. This silly dream

[Bolt, use Thunder!]

[St-] I tried to think, but I encountered a subtle resistance. It wasn't strong or firm, but it was just light enough to convey a message.

\_I have this.\_

\_I know what to do.\_

I shrugged and watched contentedly.

"Cha!" Static shouted, bouncing forward and smashing his palms in front of the opponent Pikachu. Bolt flinched back startled just as Static introduced him to his fist. The punch was imperfect, and instead of sending him flying backward, it sent Bolt soaring into the air.

"Piikaaaa!" Bolt cried, sending down an enormous bolt of electricity crashing down at Static. It struck him directly, singeing his fur and knocking him to the ground.

Bolt landed expertly on his paws, and swaggered over to finish Static off. Static sprang up, kicking Bolt directly in the chest, and pushing him back into the crater created by his thunder attack. Bolt collapsed unconscious, and Static bounced up, panting slightly.

Ethan bowed curtly in acknowledgement.

[Nice going, Static!] I smiled.

[Once you've fought so many of these guys, you know?] Static explained. [Just, it's like \_I know, I know. \_Hit them with the thing, than hit them with the other thing that doesn't stun them till they stop moving. Simple.]

[Simple.] I smirked. [Okay, return.]

"Go, Frill!" Ethan commanded. His voice sounded nothing like his mind, and had a surprisingly dark edge.

"Go, Nova!" I ordered, tossing a Pok  ball in turn. A Wartortle appeared on the other side with dark blue skin and a vibrant white

shell. Nova stood tensed for battle, before blinking in disbelief and relaxing.

[Oh my god. Squirtle?] Nova asked in awe.

[Woah! Charmander, is that you?]

[I didn't think I'd ever see you again!] Nova laughed happily, running and hugging Frill on the other side of the field. Frill laughed and returned the hug, spinning Nova in the air.

[You got adopted!] Frill laughed in his mirth. [I'm so proud of you!]

[He's a really great guy!] Nova chirped.

Frill just grinned, and hugged Nova again. [Man, I'm so happy to see you!]

[Same!] Nova chuckled. [How's your trainer!]

[Really understanding.] Frill nodded. [He's super cool about stuff. He's the one that adopted Bulbasaur too!]

[Ack!] Ethan tensed suddenly. Frill twitched to shoot him a confused look. [Don't tell him that! That's part of our strategy, you can't go giving that stuff away!]

[Oh. Oops.] Frill puffed his cheeks awkwardly. [Well, uh, now you know.]

[Sorry, for interrupting.] I began, addressing Frill. Frill looked up. [Are you a shiny? Why is your shell that color?]

[Nope, not shiny. I'm just made wrong.] Frill giggled.

[You're not \_made\_ wrong!] Nova frowned. [You're made perfectly the way you are.]

[I'm not upset about it.] Frill laughed, shrugging. [It was just a joke.]

[You always joke about it, but I've seen you alone. You try to paint your shell, or chug HP Up's thinking it'll help. You're hurting.]

[Iâ€¦I don't do that anymore.] Frill's smirk soured, and he looked away.

[It's okay to hurt, I just don't like you seeing you hurt yourself so other people feel more comfortableâ€¦]

[You don't have to take everything so \_seriously\_, \_Nova!]

Frill rolled his eyes, grinning. [If I say I'm fine, I'm fine. There's not always 'hidden context' behind everything.]

Nova stood for a moment, then sighed. [Wellâ€¦okay. If you promise.]

[I promise.] Frill beamed.

[So, uhâ€¦] Ethan bit his lip. [How are we going to do this? Restart this round, each of us go to opposite ends?]

[Huh?] Ethan's comment caught me off guard. [Oh. Uh, yeah, that sounds fine.]

[Battle, battle, battle, battle, battle.] Frill mocked, using his paw as a tiny mouth. [All we do, I swear.]

[Josh is the same way.] Nova grinned sheepishly.

[Hey!] I berated, laughing at my own expense.

[Coming!] Nova chirped, tripping over himself to scuttle over to me.]

[Frill! You too!] Ethan scowled. [Come on, you're making me look bad!]

[Coming, \_mom.\_] Frill giggled, slowly walking back to Ethan.

Ethan sighed, then looked up. [Alright, you ready?]

[I think so.] I laughed.

[Alright. Frill, use Water Gun!]

[Nova, use Outrage!]

\* \* \*

><p>[Wait, why Outrage?] Nova inquired. I blinked, not being use to people questioning my choices.<p>

[Um, it would do more damage than any other of your attacks.] I quickly responded.

[He's not \_like \_the others, Josh!] Nova explained. [He only has one hit point! Any attack would knock him out.]

[Oh, right. Well, just hit him, I suppose. Use Ember?]

\_I can't believe I just suggested using a fire attack on a water typeâ€¦|\_

"Char!" Nova cheered in agreement and charged at Frill, shooting a small blast of embers. Frill dove out of the way and retaliated with a blast of water, showering Nova.

"Dah!" Nova yelped, cowering.

[Nova, use Ember again!] I ordered.

Frill was faster, and dashed at Nova, sensing his hesitance. He snatched Nova's arm, and simply hurled him across the field.

Nova crashed back to the ground; his mouth full of earth. He pushed himself up, and spat out the dirt. Frill charged again, but Nova was prepared.



"Squrrr!" Frill shouted, narrowly blocking the Embers with a quick Protect. Nova shot more which Frill also avoided, and then used Protect against the third wave.

"\*\*Stand still!\*\*" Nova growled, shooting another sea of embers. Frill stuck out his tongue, hiding behind a small green Protect sphere. Nova charged, breaking the sphere with a clenched fist, and ran Frill through with his multicolored claws.

The white glow of Nova's eyes went away, as he gazed at Frill with shock. Frill looked back with a dazed, but pleased look in his eyes.

[You've gotten better.] Frill laughed as Nova's claws disappeared into nothingness. [I'm proud of you.]

With nothing to support him, Frill slumped on the floor unconscious.

"Cha." Nova nodded to his fallen friend.

[Return.] I beamed. Nova scurried to my side of the field as I drew another Pok  ball.

\* \* \*

><p>[Go, Ivysaur!]<p>

[Get 'em, Static!]

Static beamed triumphantly, eyeing his new foe. [Standard set?]

[Nope. Fake out, then Hidden Power Ice.]

[What? I thought that ice was weak to grass!]

[Nope. Stronger.]

[  I swear, this changes every week.] He grumbled.

[No, it's been constant since  well, ever.] I chuckled.

[I have no idea how you keep all this in your skull.] Static shook his head in disbelief.

[Just trust me.] I grinned. [Go!]

Static raced across the field, pounding his paws into the grass. The Ivysaur concentrated, shutting its eyes and firmly standing his ground. Static closed the gap between them in record speed, smashing his paws in front of the Ivysaur, stunning it momentarily.

"I  " The Ivysaur whispered, eyes opening and revealing a look of terror. Static grinned, sensing his opponent's fear, and focused on his next attack.

"\*\*\_I FORFEIT!\_\*\*" Ethan cried, running in front of Static. Static awkwardly stumbled to a stop, falling onto the grass in an attempt

\_not \_to attack the trainer.

The Ivysaur's pupils were pinpricks now as he held his mouth open at an awkward angle. No sound came out, only the panicked ruffling of Ethan as he rummaged through his backpack. Ivysaur now had a bluish blush on his face, and both his eyes were fiercely shut. Ivysaur fell to his side, the bluish tinged overcoming his face as he curled in pain. Ethan swiftly grabbed some shining piece of metal from his bag, and pressed it into Ivysaur's mouth. A puff of air went off, and everything seemed to relax.

[Iâ€¦I didn'tâ€¦] The Ivysaur strained, obviously in distress.

[Shhh. Just breathe.] Ethan commanded, still inserting the metal device into Ivysaur's mouth. I stood to the right of the scene, still in shock. What just happened?

"Sorry about that," Ethan stood up, and dusted himself off. "Rather anti-climactic victory, but-"

"Anti-climactic?" I interrupted. "I don't know what just happened, but I wouldn't call it anti-climactic."

"It'sâ€¦a personal affliction." Ethan looked away. "I think he would prefer-"

[He stopped breathing.] Nova answered. Everyone turned to the small reptile, including Ivysaur, who stared at him with a look of incredulity.

[\_Charmander?\_] He asked in awe.

[Hey Bulbas-, err, Ivysaur now, huh?]

[Yeah! Oh, hah, I guess you're a Charmeleon, heh. It's been so long!]

The two reunited in a quick hug, and were quickly chatting about the events that had transpired since their parting.

"Well, darn." Ethan snapped his fingers. "Well, I guess we're second. Fair is fair."

"Hardly fair." I frowned. "Forfeiting to save your PokÃ©mon's life shouldn't be considered losing."

"I might've made a fuss about it." He shrugged, grinning. "But you really took a load off my mind for adopting that Charmander. I couldn't take all three, and I felt sick about it for weeks. That Matilda lady was-"

"-A total \_bitch!\_" Ethan and I finished at the same time.

"I know, right?" I responded, now enthusiastic. "She was \_terrible!\_ Thank god she retired."

"Did she?" Ethan asked. "Thank goodness. I sent a complaint to the adoption committee, but with all the red tape I just assumedâ€¦" He trailed off.

"Maybe it did help; maybe that's why she had to retire." I offered.

"How is the little guy?" Ethan asked. "Last time I saw him, he wouldn't even willingly be in the same room as me."

[I've gotten a little better.] Nova blushed from his conversation with Ivysaur.

"Um, what?" Ethan blinked in disbelief.

[I said I've gotten a bit better.] Nova articulated.

"You canâ€¦understand me?" Ethan looked down in shock.

"Woah!" I reeled. "I knew you could \_read\_, butâ€¦"

[Just a little bit. I can't speak it of course, but I can listen.]

"Oh, that is \_so cool.\_" Ethan laughed.

[T-thanks!]

I grinned. "Well, Ethan, I look forward to battling you again tomorrow night. It should be quite a crowd, hmmm?"

Ethan leaned back, his tired blue eyes flashing a look of uncertainty. "Ehhh.. I'm not sure. My PokÃ©mon really wanted the lead, but failing at that they wanted to go to the Fuchsia Pond thing."

"Fuchsia what?"

Ethan looked up. "The Fuchsia Pondâ€¦thing?"

I shook my head.

"How long have you been in Fuchsia?" Ethan smiled warily.

"Almost a full day?" I grinned sheepishly. "What should I know?"

"There's some kind of pool-esc party some wild PokÃ©mon are hosting." Ethan sniggered. "No-humans-allowed. Apparently owned PokÃ©mon \_are\_ allowed in though, and it's been all the fuss recently. It's the same night as the show, of course."

The gears in my head slowly began spinning. "Ethan, can you give me a second? Stay right here, okay?"

"Uh, sure?" Ethan gave me a queer look as I raced around the corner, and tossed all my PokÃ©balls onto the grass.

\* \* \*

><p>[Yes!] Static yelped, interrupting me.<p>

[Static.] I deadpanned. [You didn't even let me say the other

option.]

[All I heard was 'or'.] He grinned. ['We could go to the play \_or'\_. Which means there's something else!]

[Yes, there's something else.] I sighed.

[Well, don't leave us hanging.] Skarr motioned for me to continue.

[There is some sort of no-humans-allowed get together-]

[I'm there!] Static squealed instantaneously.

[You don't even knowâ€¦] I growled, trailing off.

[All I know is that it's human \_excluded. \_None of your smelly bodies stinking up the place.] Static stuck out his tongue.

[Before we make a decision-]

[Josh?] Nova interrupted.

[Yes Nova?] I sighed.

[I don't think you smell.]

[Thank you Nova.] I smiled wearily. [Anyway, before we make a decision, I think we should know more about it. And what better way-]

[I know about it.] Myst shrugged.

[What?]

[I haven't been to one in Fuchsia,] She admitted. [But I have been to these. Essentially it's just a whole lot of PokÃ©mon getting together, chatting about life as a wild PokÃ©mon or as a captured one, and re-connecting with lost friends.]

[â€¦That's it?] I asked curiously.

[That's it.] Myst confirmed.

[Well, I'm still not sure if I'm comfortable-]

[Yes!] Static chirped.

I slumped to the floor groaning. [Can everyone \_pleaaaaase \_stop interrupting me!]

[I haven't interrupted you once.] Starr pointed out.

[â€¦Thank you Ska-]

[Not one time.] He smirked evilly.

I groaned. Having to manage four PokÃ©mon was harder than I had imagined.

[The situation is handled. Here.] Skarr patted me on the head, then turned to face the group. [All in favor of attending this new event?]

Static's paw shot up, along with Skarr's wing. Nova shrugged, uncaring. Myst glanced at Nova, and equally shrugged.

[Two votes yes, two votes abstained. That's a yes.] Skarr nodded.

[â€|Thank you?] I more asked then stated. Skarr bowed. [Alright, let's go tell Ethan he can have the first place spot.]

\* \* \*

><p>"Wow, thanks! Onlyâ€|" Ethan looked awkwardly at the ticket stub I was offering. "We, umâ€|we all chose not to go."<p>

"What? But you wanted the spot!"

"They...they're not big on plays." Ethan sighed. "It's a forgotten art. They all elected to go to the pond rather thanâ€|'sit and watch humans judge us'. I think is how they put it."

"Well, I'll just give it back then." I shrugged, walking back in the pageant entrance.

"Wait!" Ethan cried out, his face looking confused as if it hadn't expected his outburst. I turned, questioningly. "Um, so your PokÃ©mon are going to be away tomorrow, as are mine, right?"

"Yeah?"

Ethan puffed out his cheeks, and let a slow stream of air out. "This is going to sound \_really \_gayâ€|" Ethan paused, gathering his courage. "But, um, do you want to attend the pageant together? I mean, nothing else to do, right?"

"Actually, sure." I shrugged. I had always enjoyed pageants, despite their diminishing popularity. "It does feel rather weird going to one alone."

"Alright, cool. I'll save you a seat tomorrow." Ethan waved, and walked down the road to the Gym.

\* \* \*

><p>[<em>Soooooooo?<em>]

[So?]

[\_Soooooooooooo?\_]

[So what?]

[So are ya gonna return us to our pokeballs, while you guysâ€|?] Static wiggled his eyebrows in a suggestive motion.

I had just explained (due to a recent phone call from Sandy) that my birthday was today. Apologies and Happy Birthday's abounded, and I

grinned and received the praise. I told them that Sandy might be coming to join us this evening, which prompted Static's rude remark.

[No, no, no.] I waved him off. [I was hoping that everyone could stay together tonight, and that we could all celebrate my 18th as, like, a little group.] I smiled.

[Dude.] Myst gave me a look. [You'd rather hang with us then get laid?]

[I mean!] I sighed. [Its customary to have a party with some of your friends-]

[Hit thaaaat!] Static interrupted.

[Seriously.] Myst laughed, and in a rare moment, high-fived Static.

[Guys.] I tried to get the group's attention.

[But seriously, we're going on our PokÃ©ball, right? I wouldn't want to be there for \_those \_thirty seconds!] Static sniggered.

[No, he's a gentlemen.] Myst stood up straight, in a mock, dignified stance. [And you know \_gentlemen \_always come \_after \_the lady.]

The group roared with laughter as I held my face in my hand.

[Does her skin color ever rub off on you?] Skarr asked with complete seriousness. I stopped face palming for a moment in absolute incredulity.

[â€|What?] I asked after a moment.

[You know.] Skarr blushed, [Does she ever, like, wash off on you? Do you get a bit brown when you two make love? That was always a problem with Karliah and me; we would get metal shavings\_everywhere-]\_

I shut my eyes as hard as I could, trying to block out the mental image forming in my mind. Just then, a tap on my shoulder alerted me to a dark-skinned presence behind myself.

[Hey boys~!] Sandy hummed, hugging me from behind. [And Myst, of course. What were y'all talking 'bout?]

\* \* \*

><p>"Wait for itâ€|"<p>

"Sandy, this isn't-"

"Waaait for itttâ€|!"

"This is stupi-"

"And you're officially no longer jailbait!" Sandy smirked, looking at her watch triumphantly. "8:04 pm., Josh turns eighteen!"

"You're still a cougar." I grinned. "Aren't girls supposed to date

up? What's a twenty year old dating a \_teen?\_"

"I never heard you complain."

The sun was just about to set over the Fuchsia Valley, sending streaks of pink and violet across the sky. A soft breeze ruffled our blanket as we sat under a large birch tree, seemingly out of place in the forest of oak. It was rather silent, except for my partner who sat beside me, grinning ear to ear.

"That's just because I hold it all inside." I smirked. "I keep it all bottled up until it gives me \_cancer.\_"

"That's not funny." Sandy pouted, poking the tip of my nose. "Not all of us can be -Von-Feelings, and be all touchy-feely like you are."

"Hippy-Von-Feelings?"

Sandy giggled. "Shut up, I couldn't think of a good name."

"That's not a good name? I think Mr. Hippy-Von-Feelings would disagree." I flashed her smile, and she returned it with a playful punch.

"You're just so \_open.\_" Sandy said, after a small pause. She rested her head in her hands, laying on the soft blanket.

"You know if I said the same thing to you all I would've gotten would be another punch." I grinned. Sandy growled and swiped at me, but I moved just out of her reach.

"I was being serious!" Sandy pouted. "That was genuine, and you ruined it."

"I'm allowed to ruin things today." I laughed, my permanent grin never faltering. "It's my birthday, and I can do what I want!"

"Ooh, that reminds me." Sandy reached a lazy hand to her side, and snatched her purse. "Lay down for a sec, will you?"

"Why, so I'm in your punching range?"

"You're never \_out\_ of my punching range." She quipped, motioning for me to lie down. I complied, using my bedroll as a pillow. "Now, I have two gifts, and a not-a-gift. Which one do you want first?"

"What's a 'not-a-gift'?"

Sandy turned to me, with a serious look in her eyes. "It's something I have to give you, but it's not a gift."

I gave her a puzzled look.

"We'll do that one last." She muttered to herself. "Here, just close your eyes."

I happily complied, then realized one of the 'gifts' might involve horseradish and shrimp. My eyes bolted open, and my hands rushed to

cover my exposed nose. Sandy flinched in shock, holding something bluish.

"I told you not to look!" She yelped, flicking me in the nose and quickly hiding the blue object.

"I thought one of the 'gifts' might involve shrimp." I slumped sheepishly, rubbing my nose.

"Oh. That would have been funny." Sandy chuckled, holding the object behind her back. "Oh well, whatever, you probably already saw it." She reached around, presenting the bluish scarf. "Taa-daa!"

"Is this a€|?"

"Choice Scarf, yeah. I don't think Static would get much use out of it, but maybe for Nova or Myst. If you don't like it, I can always exchange-"

"No, I \_love \_it!" I grinned, rubbing the soft, silky fabric between my fingers. "I can use this for so many strategies! Nova and Myst are going to \_love \_this!"

"I'm glad you like it." Sandy sat up, and gave me a little hug. "Alright, gift two. This one is a bit less impressive than gift one; I had to pull a lot of strings for that scarf, hehe."

"Nothing too bad, I hope?" A sudden sense of guilt came over me. How much did that cost?

"Not for you." She gave me a small, coy look. "Anyway!" She pulled out something flashy and red, and twirled it around her finger. "Taa-daa!"

I squinted, not recognizing what it was.

"It's a Focus Sash." Sandy answered my unspoken question.

"Oh!" I realized. "Oh wow, thanks! Both of these are mine?"

"Well, the Focus Sash was cheap. Remember, you can only use these puppies once."

"Oh, rightâ€|" I sighed. "Still, it's the best one-use item you can find. Static could wreck with this. He could probably get three moves off if he's lucky, on \_any \_PokÃ©mon. Granted he's fasterâ€|well, two if he's not." I reasoned.

"Well, I'll let you think about it." She smiled, placing it in my palm. Her hands were warm, despite the chill of the approaching night.

"So what is this non-gift?" I inquired, squinting curiously. Sandy's playful gaze turned serious, almostâ€|sorrowful.

"Okay. First off, this is \_not, \_repeat, \_not \_a gift."

"Okay?"



"Ready?"

"Sure."

"Close your eyes, and \_don't\_ open them this time."

"Okay." I shut my eyes. I heard some shuffling, and Sandy moving around the blanket.

"Hold out your hands." She ordered. I did so. "No, like, as if you were cupping water to drink." I considered the motion for a moment, before cupping my hands together. "Yeah, like that. Okay, here you go."

It felt smooth, and cool. My hands ran across its surface; it was almost completely circular, except for an indentation around its perimeter, and two, small bumps-

"\_Ohmygod.\_" My eyes shot open, confirming my fear. "Sandy, how on Earth-

"Not a gift, and not from me." She shook her head.

"Thisâ€¦this is worth more thanâ€¦" I struggled to come up with a price; as far as I knew, they didn't even have one. There were three confirmed in existence, but even then their locations were kept hidden, lest they be robbed.

A Masterball. The only device that can capture a PokÃ©mon with guaranteed success, even ancient ones with untold, stupefying power.

"I wouldn't sell it if I were you." She winked. "Too much attention. Plus no bank would store all that money without giving you a \_seriously \_weird look."

"How?" I just asked, dumbfounded.

"This isn't from me." She shook her head. "I simplyâ€¦mentionedâ€¦you to the right person, and, well, they had one in stock."

"I am not important enough for this." I looked at the priceless sphere before me. "Why did theyâ€¦?"

"Sponsorship. You've blown through the gyms faster than anyone in years, and you've been taking breaks. If you win, then theoretically you're on their side. Maybe you'll tell the world about the company that gave you what you needed to survive the Cave, and beat the Elite four."

"So there's a game behind this, thenâ€¦" I muttered, still transfixed with the orb.

"More than you know." She whispered back. "It also comes with a caveat."

"Which is?"

"\_When\_ â€" they told me to say \_when\_ \_not\_ \_if\_, \_so\_ \_when\_ \_you\_ catch a legendary in that, they want you to bring it to their labs, for

study. Nothing particularly mad scientist-esc, just simple tests like stamina, endurance, and power."

"Who are these people?"

"The Cinnabar Institute for Research and Technology, C-I-R-T." Sandy enunciated.

I sat in silence for a moment, feeling completely overwhelmed. This wasn't \_real, \_was it? This was just me messing around, pretending I had what it took to actually beat the Elite Four. I was never\_serious. \_This was just me having fun with a few friends, goofing off as if we actually had what it took. Sheer luckâ€|no. Maybe it was more than that, but not enough for this. Not even close.

\_If I sold this, I wouldn't have to work a day in my life.\_

\_I could be done. Finished. I could spend the rest of my life, my PokÃ©mon's life, and my children's lives in absolute luxury.\_

\_Orâ€|\_

"I don't know what to say." I whispered softly, in awe.

\_I could follow this silly dreamâ€|and see how far the rabbit hole goes. I already have six badges, no doubt I could at least get the seventh from Blaine. If I could nab a legend, maybe, just maybeâ€|\_

"I think you have what it takes." Sandy turned to me, without a trace of sarcasm in her voice. Her auburn eyes reflected the scarce moonlight as she gazed upon me with certainty.

"Deep downâ€|I guess I never thought I would get this far." I muttered. Saying the simple phrase felt like removing a splinter that had festered for far too long. It hurt, but it had needed to be said even if I hadn't realized it.

"No one ever does, until they cross that threshold." Sandy smiled with recollection. Her eyes glazed over, and she leaned back calmly. "I remember when I first bested the Elite four. I was so youngâ€|" She laughed. "â€|but I had learned a lot from my mother. She was talking to the champion, and I was left alone in the lobbyâ€|

"I have no idea why they let me in." Sandy chuckled. "I guess they thought I was some sort of tiny prodigy."

"Youâ€|\_were \_a prodigy." I laughed nervously.

Sandy made a move to rebate my complement, but thought better of it. "Well, I meanâ€|I don't know, \_technically, \_I guess." In the night, I thought I could almost make out a blush on her darkened skin. When she turned to me however, her face was clear.

"Tell me more." I smiled, leaning back.

"Well, I always kept some of mom's rental PokÃ©mon on me, right?" She nodded. "She had begun teaching me at a young age, and trusted me to

walk in the Battle Park's tall grass as a child-

"-Those Pok  mon'll rip you to shreds!" I yelped, terrified a parent would allow such a thing.

"If you don't have Pok  mon to protect you, yeah." Sandy chuckled.

"What level are those  ?" I struggled.

"Fifty-ish."

"And what level were your rentals  ?"

"In the forties. But remember, I was a trainer, so it was a pretty fair fight."

I shook my head in disbelief, awed that Sandy was still alive.

"And, yeah." Sandy smiled, eyes once again glazed. "They let me in, I beat them one by one, and finally, the champion was called down. It created a ruckus, because he wasn't even scheduled to work that day, considering no challengers had been scheduled." She smirked. "And picture my mom's face when she sees me, a six year old girl, about to face the most powerful trainer in Kanto."

"And they let you?"

"My mom admitted later that it was to teach me humility." Sandy shrugged. "The Champion, well, I think he was just bored. Neither of them thought a six year old with no items and a team of level forties could beat the champion, with his honed team of level sixties."

"And you did?"

Sandy smiled widely. "Yup. It took everything I had, and it was a narrow victory, but I won." She laughed quietly. "No one knew what to do. There were so many complications; the fact I had no badges, the fact the Pok  mon weren't mine, the fact I wasn't even old enough to have Pok  mon  !"

"But?"

"But the Champion overruled them all. Told them that I had won fair in square, and even went so far as to offer me the position as Champion." Her youthful smile never faltered. "Of course, my mother declined for me, as I was only six. But I still got my certificate, an honorary trainer's card despite my age, and the video of my battle against the Champion got sent around the world."

"Wow." I whispered.

"From then, it was Battle Park life for me." Sandy leaned back, her story concluded, and a yawn on her lips. "What about you?"

"Well, you already know how I got Static." I shrugged.

"What about everything else?" Sandy curled around me, pushing me lightly to the floor. "Mr-holds-no-secrets. You were upset at me

\_being all secretive about \_my \_past, but I don't know anything about your upbringing either!"

"That's 'cause it's not that interesting." I deflected, looking away.

"Come on." Sandy's dark, playful eyes begged at my own.  
"Please?"

"You're going to be disappointed."

"Try me." She rested her head on my stomach, and gazed at the stars.

\* \* \*

><p>It was a senior. My school was a small one, as most children of my age had left to go exploring the Kanto region long ago, with big dreams and shiny new trainer cards.<p>

I felt extremely alone.

Despite my yearning to go joining my peers, my parents had insisted I stay in schooling. Well, I say my parentsâ€|truly, it was my mother. My father simply stood as an imposing shadow behind her, agreeing with any decision she would make.

Looking back on it, she wasn't exactly \_wrong. \_I learned a lot in schooling, even though I found most of it to be a waste of time.

I wouldn't say I disliked my parents. The word is far too strong for the petty, snide feelings I felt towards them. More than anything, I felt disappointed. I knew my father would stand by me in the end, no matter what. My mother thoughâ€|I always felt as if she was trying to discourage me. Persuade me from following my dreams, and convince me to go into accounting, or finance.

"You're always so good with numbers." She cooed, a tired look in her light blue eyes. "Why would you waste your life on the impossible when you can live comfortably with a stable job, a nice familyâ€|?"

I tried to explain that there was more to life than living at a desk, crunching numbers. Sure I excelled at statistics and probability, but what was the point when offices already had machines that did that for you? My gift applied to \_battling, \_to the quick choices that needed to be made on the spot to allow my dreams to be a success.

She never listened. Or if she did, it was only to find another way to shoot me down.

I rarely went home at all in high school. Between work and training static, I really only used my house to sleep. I worked as a waiter, and though the hours were long and the customers weren't always kind, the pay was consistent. They also gave me a free meal a day, which I used frequently as an excuse to eat away from home.

Training Static was my favorite hobby, of course. There weren't many powerful PokÃ©mon nearby, and once he reached level thirty, it became

increasingly frustrating trying to find stronger Pok  mon for him to battle. We talked and talked, and finally decided, on a long weekend, to travel to Ruin Valley. The original plan was to try to find and capture a Pidgeot, but when we saw Skarr atop that mountain  

He looked so majestic. I mean, it's weird to talk about now, but  my gosh. A bird, made out of that fierce, carved steel. He looked like something out of a book, glowing in the sunlight. He clocked at level thirty-five, and I was a terrified that despite Static's inherent advantage that the Skarmory would prove to powerful, and after he knocked Static unconscious he would cut me to slivers.

Somehow  we did it. The Ultraball dinged that beautiful red, and we I took him home. Skarr was incredibly intelligent, and after a short time we grew to enjoy each other's company. We would take short flights to other parts of Kanto in the evenings, so Skarr and Static could battle stronger foes. It was discouraging to not be able to battle gyms or compete against my school friends, but it was far better than nothing.

I think my biggest regret is how I left things with my parents. My father was supportive when Static practically fell in my lap, even when my mom's screams echoed through the house. That was really the only time he stood against her, but looking back, that was really the time I needed him to. I suppose I would just like to make peace with them. What I wouldn't give to see my father cheering me on when I get my last badge, or to see my mom saying that she would be proud of me, no matter what...

\* \* \*

><p>A tear rolled down my cheek. I tried to wipe my face with my sleeve, but before I could do so I was tackled by Sandy.<p>

"I believe in you." She hugged me tightly.

"  Thank you." I smiled, slightly uncomfortable by the weight she was putting on my chest. After a few moments she released me, still gazing sorrowfully in my eyes.

"Have you ever gone back?"

"What?"

"To your parents." Sandy clarified.

I shook my head, ashamed. "I haven't even sent them a postcard. For all they know, I could be dead."

Sandy frowned. "You should call them."

"I should do more than that." I sighed. "I left things terribly."

"What exactly happened?"

This time it was my turn to have my eyes glaze over in recollection  

## 20. Hope to be stuck with you forever

I was sitting in class, scribbling answers for an exam. My last for high school. That sentiment tasted bittersweet; I would love leaving and exploring the Kanto region when I finished, but I would miss the teachers and classes. I really didn't have many school friends, considering the small size of our classroom, and the only kids left in school were those that disliked battling.

It was all I thought about. All I dreamed of. This was a rare moment I actually didn't have Static in my backpack for moral support; I needed to concentrate on this exam, even though I knew I would do well. Plus if someone caught my Pokespeak in my ear it might be considered cheating.

I finished the exam, and headed home. Home. The word stung my mouth. No, I wasn't going home. I was going to a house place to pack my belongings. Three days I had until graduation. Three days I had until freedom. I had worked so hard over the past few years, studying to keep my grades up, training Static and Skarr, and amassing enough money to survive on my own, or least long enough to beat a few gyms.

"Josh!" My mom almost dropped the soup ladle in the stew as I walked through the door. "Oh! I-I didn't expect to see you today. I only made enough for two portions-, it's fine, I'll put on another pot-"

"It's fine, I don't plan to stay for dinner." I shrugged off her gesture, and made my way upstairs.

"It's justâ€¦" She muttered weakly. "I haven't seen you in a whileâ€¦"

"I've been busy." I said testily.

"Spending all your time training." She mumbled. "As if that's going to get you anywhere in life."

"â€¦I'll be upstairs." I announced, too annoyed to combat my mother's rudeness. My normally impeccable room was organized, albeit not in its typical fashion. Clothes were piled in one corner, electronics in another. Everything of importance to me was piled in my room, organized in chaos. I loathed such seeming disorganization, but it was necessary. I would be leaving, possibly just for a week or two, or possibly months. I needed to ensure I had everything I could carry.

"Josh?" My father peeked in my room. "Oh, I didn't hear you come in. Will you be joining us for-"

"No." I interrupted, shoving some clothes in my backpack.

My father was silent for a moment as he watched me pack my things.

"This is it, then?" He said quietly. "You really do plan to leave?"

"I've been planning to leave for years." I said hotly. I sighed

internally, knowing my anger wasn't resolving the issue. Even though my frustration boiled in my heart, I knew in my mind that I shouldn't have been acting like this. "â€|Sorry." I mumbled, still packing my things.

"Josh. Your mother and I..." He hesitated. I looked up in confusion. My usually stoic father stood in silence, his usual self-assured stance was replaced by one of regret.

"â€|What?" I said cautiously, not use to seeing my father like this.

"â€|Let me know if you need any help, son." My father shook his head, as if to clear his mind, and left. I heard the echoing of his footsteps permeate my room, his presence still giving me shivers.

\* \* \*

><p>Three days had passed, and graduation had come and gone. Uneventful. Only a handful of people had shown up; the family members of my graduation class of six.<p>

I carefully placed my backpack on my shoulders. I had checked and re-checked I had everything: clothes, food, money, bed rolls, my phone, and my PokÃ©balls. All check.

I walked down the stairs. My parents stood by the doorway. My father had his stoic, indifferent, hazel eyes. My mother simply looked exhausted, her usual fiery, uncontrollable red hair now seemed worn out and darkened.

I put one hand on the doorknob.

"We'll always be here when you need us." My father said emotionlessly. Maybe there was a seed of support in that phrase, but all I heard was the 'when' in his phrase. I ignored him.

"Is there anything I could do to change your mind?" My mom said softly, staring at the floor, not really waiting for her rhetorical question to be answered. "Was there ever?"

"No." I shook my head, and opened the door.

"If you need any helpâ€|" My father trailed off.

\_I haven't needed your 'help' in years.\_

My father's face changed slightly, as if he could read my thoughts. He shifted uncomfortably, and reached into his pocket.

"This isâ€|a poor way to say goodbye." He closed his eyes sighing, and handed me a check. "But if you truly wish to leave, have this. It will help you get started."

"Thank you." I said, adopting my father's stoic features, and taking the check.

"We'll always have a room for you, whenever you come back."

I walked outside, and felt the breeze on my cheek and the warm sun

against my skin.

"Honestly, I don't think I will come back." I said coolly, never turning to wave them goodbye.

\* \* \*

><p>"Okay, so that's not the <em>worst <em>goodbye ever." Sandy reasoned. "It's not like you ran away, or anything. You didn't say you hated them, in fact, I'm pretty sure you all still \_love \_each other, right?"

"Of course!" I yelped. "But, augh. I feel like I've learned so much since then. Even in the few weeks I knew you before I really 'began' my traveling, I feel like I learned so much more aboutâ€|\_people.\_I was just a brat back then, even ifâ€|well, maybe I wasn't the only one." I sighed, remembering all my mom's small put-downs, and petty remarks about 'dreams'. "Still, I feel as if I should apologize."

"What's stopping you?" Sandy inquired, brushing her hand against mine.

"â€|I wouldn't know what to say." I shrugged. "Apologize for leaving? Notâ€|really. I'm not sorry I left. I'm sorry for how I acted, but in a way, I'm sorry for how \_they \_acted too." I slumped to the floor. "I guessâ€|I don't know. I suppose I always thought I would go back after I would beat the Elite Four, but that would just be to rub it in their face. It'sâ€|childish, really. Maybe I won't ever go back."

"Joshâ€|" Sandy sighed, hugging me. "You need to face this, or it'll just rot inside you."

"Oh \_no, no, no.\_" I laughed, and pushed her away. "You can't use that phrase on me, you little hypocrite."

"I'm allowed to hold stuff in. I'm better at it." Sandy smirked, cocking her head at a comedic angle.

"Maybe some things are just better left unsolved." I sighed, sinking into my bedroll, and closing my eyes. I felt a sudden weight on my stomach, and I saw sandy sitting on me, with her knees bent at my hips.

"That is complete \_bullshit.\_" She leaned forward, her scarlet lips inches from my own. "Come on, Josh. In your infinite wisdom, that's your statement? 'Don't touch it'?"

"Some things are better left untouched. Err, unsolved." I shrugged, mind beginning to fog with desire. It was difficult to think clearly with her on top of me in such a provocative position.

"No they're not!" Sandy gave me a look. "Confronting your issues-, oh \_god \_now I sound like \_you.\_"

"So what's your angle then?" I looked at her with tired eyes. "Do we just go to our parents' house, pray that things go well, then ride a rainbow to the Battle Park and live happily ever after?"



Sandy looked like I had slapped her. She looked at me with horror in her dark, moonlit eyes.

"I didn't mean it like that." I backpeddled.

"No, you did mean it like that. That was you being honest, wasn't it?"

"No-" I argued.

"That was you. You without your faÃ§ade of social niceties, and without a care towards me. That is really how you felt."

She was right, of course. A large part of me didn't think I would ever make up with my parents. In the same way, although she might have decent relations with her mother, Sandy would never make up with her father. It's the truth, as cold and harsh as it was.

"I didn't mean to include you in that." I said honestly.

"You don't think we'll make it." Sandy stated. Small tears threatened to fall down the sides of those beautiful brown orbs I had come to love so much.

"No!" I shouted, trying to calm her down. "No! That wasn't what I meant at all! I was talking about our parents, admittedly I shouldn't have included your parents in that phrase but-"

"You don't think we'll work out." Sandy's voice cracked as she put a palm to her face, covering her eyes.

"No!" I yelped, tearing her hand off her face, and putting it fiercely my own. Her teary russet eyes met my own. "Sandy, I l-"

I quickly bit my tongue. Something almost slipped out that I wasn't sure I was ready to say. I evaluated myself, and the situation. If I said it, would it be true?

Sandy looked at me with her wide, brown eyes. Her normal strong mask was gone, replaced with an extreme look of authenticity. Not of someone who was hurt, but of someone who could be hurt. Someone that has been hurt, but someone that could lift mountains and turn tides, if they needed to. I felt like I saw her.

"Sandy, I love you."

Sandy looked down, as if processing the words in her mind. She hugged me, tears dampening the t-shirt I wore underneath my jacket. I felt guilt. Both in the way I had said it and the fact that she might not feel the same way. I always thought I would tell her in a more romantic gesture; after I beat the Elite Four, perhaps, or once we had moved in together. Not in the midst of a confused argument.

If she didn't love me I could only picture what was going through her mind. Confusion certainly; perhaps even anger. Guilt, as well. I bit the inside of my cheek angrily; how could I subject her to this?

Suddenly, Sandy looked up with a dopey, tearstained grin on her face. "Oh, this is the part where I say I love you too, right?" She

laughed, and hugged me tightly. "Didn't mean to leave you hanging, thereâ€|"

I relaxed in relief.

\_Okay. This isâ€|this is good.\_

"I was so scared; I thought it was one sidedâ€|" Sandy articulated, still giving me a bone crushing hug. "â€|and I thought you meant we wouldn't, like, work as a couple in the long runâ€|"

"Sandy, I sincerely hope with all my heart that you'll be stuck with me forever." I laughed, tears threatening once again to fall down my face.

"Oh no." Sandy broke the hug and pushed me down playfully. "It's \_you \_who will be stuck with \_me.\_"

\_I could live with thatâ€|\_

\* \* \*

><p>[So?] Static nudged my leg with an elbow. [How'd it  
<em>go?<em>]

[We went at each other like animals, wildly tearing off each other's clothes and intimately tasting each other's bodies. I'm sure I got her pregnant, with all the times we went at it.]

Static blushed a deep pink, completely unprepared for me to answer so bluntly.

[Seriously?] Myst asked incredulously.

[\_No!\_] I growled. [For the last time, we just talked!]

We were sitting at a nice Johto inspired cafÃ©, enjoying a tasty but strange mixture of a sandwich and a taco. I believe the kind waitress refereed to it as a gyro, or euro, or something of that sort. Either way, it was delicious.

[You can't \_just \_talk for an hour.] Static munched on the exotic white cheese. [Eventually something happened. I mean, I really like wiggly, but hearing her talk for more than ten minutes becomes kind of boring.]

[Nonsense! Talking is the foundation of a healthy relationship.] Skarr postured himself properly, still refusing human food, favoring his own game.

[What do you think, Nova?] Myst inquired, with a curious, predatory gaze.

Nova gulped in surprise, wincing as he accidentally swallowed a rather large bite. [Errrrâ€|I like talking?]

[Point, set, match.] Skarr smirked.

[Whatever.] Static shrugged, looking away. Myst took the opportunity to steal some of his chips. Sandy took this convenient silence to

come back from the restroom. She sat down next to me, smirking.

[What?] I asked suspiciously.

[Nothing.] She hummed. [Hey, are all you guys excited for tonight?]

[Yes!] Static yelped immediately. All the others nodded.

[I'm considering allowing Wigglytuff and Charizard out to play, but I'm not sure how \_safe \_it isâ€¦]

[It's fine.] Static waved carelessly, his mouth full of food. [Myst said so.]

[Oh?] Sandy turned to the black fox.

[I've been to these before.] Myst confirmed. [There are battles \_sometimes, \_but nothing too rough. Not like the, errm-]

Static gave her a lazy glare from across the table.

[-the uh, the Arena.] Myst finished awkwardly.

[Well, I'm glad for that, at least.]

The table was silent for a moment.

[I'd love to chat with Charizard.] Nova piped up after a moment. [I'm curious about evolution.]

[Uh, me too.] Static groaned. [If only the cost of thunderstones weren't so damn high I would've evolved by now.]

[What do you mean?] Sandy turned to Static curiously. [Thunderstones aren't-]

My eyes bulged, and I quickly drew a finger across my throat, desperately to get Sandy's attention.

[â€¦Uhhhâ€¦] Sandy glanced at me, with a concerned look. [I mean, yeah. Isn't that terrible?]

[Mmmm.] Static ate the last of his sandwich gloomily, oblivious to Josh behind him. [Someday.]

\* \* \*

><p>[I've missed you <em>sosososoooo <em>much!]

[I'm dying.]

[It's been \_forever!\_]

[You are literally killing me right now.]

Wigglytuff was practically engulfing Static inside her with the intensity she was hugging him. His muzzle was squashed into the fur in her stomach, completely preventing airflow as she crushed him

against herself with her paws.

[I can't breathe.] Static deadpanned.

Wigglytuff released him, and Static fell to the floor gasping for air, more for theatrical effect than actual need for oxygen.

[Did you miss me!?] Wigglytuff waddled over to Static, looking over him curiously.

[You know, maybe a bit...] Static mumbled. This earned him another, albeit less aggressive, hug.

"I'm glad you decided to let them tag along." I smiled to Sandy.

"I'm just-" Sandy frowned, and adjusted her Pokespeak. [I'm just trusting \_you all \_to keep an eye on them, okay?]

[Seriously?] The lumbering, eight foot giant of a Charizard growled.

[All the tiny Pok  mon could gang up on you or something.] Sandy reasoned.

[Then I would eat them.]

[You couldn't eat all-]

[\_All.]\_ The Charizard lumbered closer. [Of them.]

[Well, I trust you have it handled then, Zader.]

[Zader?] Skarr questioned.

[My name is Charizard, and I am female.] The Charzard grimaced.

[Chari never liked my nicknames  ] Sandy purred.

[My name is \_Charizard\_. The name suits me. It means I kill things smaller, annoying things.] She huffed in Sandy's direction.

Sandy beamed into the eyes of the snarling dragon. I was sweating bullets at her mere PRESENCE, let alone it's unhappy attitude. If it wasn't for Sandy's competence as a trainer, I would have fled long ago.

[Anyway, you all have fun. Come back if things get too rowdy, all right?]

A chorus of affirmations littered their thoughts as the Pok  mon walked a familiar trail, deep into the woods.

[Where am I even going?] the dragon thought, annoyed.

\* \* \*

><p>(Myst POV)<p>

It was quite a ways away. We had walked for hours, until the sun was on the horizon. The conversation was pleasant, but my comrades were not always trustingâ€|

"Are you sure you know where you're going?"

"You can't smell that?"

"Smell what?"

I inhaled the forest air, and continued moving in her precious direction. "The lake."

"It's strong." Charizard rumbled. "It doesn't smell natural."

"I don't smell itâ€|" Static mumbled.

"I don't either." Wigglytuff frowned.

"What do \_you \_think it smells like, Nova?" I asked.

Nova scrunched his face in concentration. "It smellsâ€|it smells like berries. Butâ€|different, somehow."

"Oh. I kind of smell it." Static sniffed the air cautiously.

"I still don't." Wigglytuff grumbled.

"Every few months, wild PokÃ©mon and owned PokÃ©mon alike escape their circumstances and meet up for aâ€|reunion, if you will." I smirked, my eyes half-open. "As a reminder of the temptations and luxuries the wild life has to offer, PokÃ©mon collect berries throughout the months between these 'reunions'. Shuckles are \_exceedingly \_good at this."

"What do they do with them all?" Nova asked.

"We store them underground, in a way to ensure they don't rot." I smirked.

"Wouldn't that cause them to ferment?" Skarr pondered.

"Yes."

Skarr stopped walking, and looked concerned. "Whatâ€|do they do with this mass of fermented berries?"

"Drain them all in the Fushia lake!"

"That can't be good for the fish!" Wigglytuff gasped. "They would be wasted \_all the time\_."

"That lake has likely been cleared for centuries, save for amphibious PokÃ©mon." I reasoned.

"Excuse me," Nova asked cautiously. "What does 'ferment' mean, in reference to fruit?"

"You'll find out." I cackled. It was subtle, but the ground beneath them was now vibrating, and a small pulse went through the air. After

clearing through a few more trees, a huge mass of Pok  mon appeared, circled around an enormous, red-hazed lake. I walked forward and dunked my paw in, grabbing some of the reddish liquid, and slurping it.

"Perfect." I smiled. In the middle of the lake on a small island, a group of Pok  mon were arguing. There were four Loudred, a Scrafty, a Murkrow, two Gastly, a Spiritomb, and a Charmeleon who looked \_nothing\_ like Nova. His features were sharp and jaded, and his coat was much darker. Nothing like smooth, light-coated, adorable Nova.

Our little rag-tag group began dispersing as Static and Wiggly disappeared into the crowd, followed by Charizard and Skarr into the skies. Nova looked towards me with an awkward, confused look written into his face.

"So, what do we, like-"

"\*\*\_LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!\_\*\*" A voice boomed from across the lake, interrupting Nova and nearly shattering my eardrums. Two Loudred sat next to the dark Charmander, who was grinning ear to ear. The Loudred were projecting his voice, making it obscenely loud. "\*\*\*I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT I CAME HERE TO PARTY TONIGHT!\*\*"

"\_YEAH!\_" The crowd of Pok  mon cheered near the lake. Nova stood dumbfounded. I giggled.

"\*\*\_ARE YOU WITH ME!?\_\*\*" The Charmeleon asked, drinking in the love of the crowd.

"\_YEAH!\_"

"\*\*\_THEN PUT YOUR PAWS UP RIGHT NOW!\_\*\*" He grinned. "\*\*\*Put 'em up, put 'em up, put 'em up!\_\*\*"

"What is going on!?" Nova gulped, looking around in horror.

"Calm down. It's just music!" I smiled.

"But, all the people  !"

"Just enjoy it!" I cried over the sounds of the Loudred.

\*\*\_Paws up high!\_\*\*

\*\*\_Every time I come to party!\_\*\*

\*\*\_Shot, shot, shot, shot!\_\*\*

\*\*\_'Cause it's time to get it started!\_\*\*

"I don't know what it is, but I like it!" Nova screamed over the bass.

"Do you want to dance!?" I shouted, grinning.

"What!?"

"DO YOU WANT TO DANCE!?"

"YEAH!"

\*\*\_Now that the moon's down low,\_\*\*

\*\*\_Let's let the party go,\_\*\*

\*\*\_Until the Loudred blow! (What!?)\_\*\*

\*\*\_(We'll stay up 'till the BREAK OF DAWN!)\_\*\*

\*\*\_Don't make no mistake,\_\*\*

\*\*\_The party's in the lake,\_\*\*

\*\*\_The party's in the lake!\_\*\*

"WHAT DO THEY MEAN?"

"ABOUT THE LAKE!?" I screamed a response to Nova

"YEAH! I DON'T GET IT!"

"DRINK SOME!"

\*\*\_But hey,\_\*\*

\*\*\_I don't care. (I don't care!)\_\*\*

\*\*\_Wherever there's the party\_\*\*

\*\*\_I'm the first one with my paws in the air!\_\*\*

\*\*\_(Put 'em up, Put 'em up!)\_\*\*

\*\*\_We can share,\_\*\*

\*\*\_(Yeah!)\_\*\*

\*\*\_'Cause when we finish this one,\_\*\*

\*\*\_There'll be another party next year!\_\*\*

Nova cupped the red water in his hands, and gulped it down, making a face.

"LIKE IT!?" I grinned.

"IT BURNS, BUT NOT LIKE SPICE, OR HEAT!" Nova shouted back, confused.

"YEAH! COOL, RIGHT?"

\*\*\_Paws in the air,\_\*\*

\*\*\_Have me another sip,\_\*\*

\*\*\_Who believes in blackin' out?\_\*\*

\*\*\_I'm trying to get me there!\_\*\*

\*\*\_Work it nice and slow, \_\*\*

\*\*\_When the bass gets low, \_\*\*

\*\*\_Chug all of it down, \_\*\*

\*\*\_And lose con-TROL! \_\*\*

I joined all the others in drinking a large helping as soon as the bass dropped. The crowd screamed in approval to the beat of the band as we shook our fur free from the sticky juice. I laughed in mirth, but it was completely drowned out by the blasting of the song.

\*\*\_Messed up! \_\*\*

\*\*\_(Messed up!) \_\*\*

\*\*\_Get wasted! \_\*\*

\*\*\_(Wasted!) \_\*\*

\*\*\_Go crazy and get shit fac-ed! \_\*\*

\*\*\_Let's get it crunk, \_\*\*

\*\*\_Let's get drunk! \_\*\*

\*\*\_Let's get buck-ass wild! \_\*\*

\*\*\_Tear it up! \_\*\*

The song quieted down, in preparation for its conclusion. Nova looked unnerved, so I wandered over.

"What's wrong?" I bounced.

"I don'tâ€¦I don't get the whole atmosphere." Nova shook his head.

"That's because you're thinking too hard!" I grinned, leading him forward towards the blood red lake.

"I didn't like it." Nova frowned.

"You didn't like it \_yet.\_" I grinned.

\*\*\_But hey, I don't care, \_\*\*

\*\*\_(I don't care!) \_\*\*

\*\*\_Whenever there's a party I'm the first one with my paws in the air! \_\*\*

\*\*\_We can share, \_\*\*

\*\*\_'Cause when we finish this lake \_\*\*

\*\*\_There'll be another waiting next year! \_\*\*



The band concluded with a scream of adoring fans. The Charmeleon and two of the Loudred bowed and grinned, but the Pok  mon around them scowled.

\*\*\*\_Thank you!\_\*\*\* The Charmeleon bowed. \*\*\*\_That was a human inspired hit that I'm sure none of you wildies have ever heard! Just another perk to being in the human world!\_\*\*\* He laughed.\*\*\*\_Next up is 'The Darkness Within', and afterwards, it's me once again to grace your ears!\_\*\*\*

The crowd roared in approval as the next band set itself up on the island. I turned to see Nova face first in the lake.

"Nova!" I cried, pulling him out. Nova blinked in confusion, then took a large swallow.

"How much do I have to drink?" Nova asked, a small blush beginning to form on his normally orange muzzle.

"I think you're good." I smiled uneasily. Nova waddled to the edge of the lake and joined in cheering the next band.

\_This is going to be a night to remember.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong><em>LET THE BEAT DROOOP!<em>\*\*\*

A scream of approval roared from around the lake, Nova and Myst included. We had long since forgotten how many songs each band had played, or how many 'sips' either of us had indulged in since the beginning of the party. A healthy rose blush adorned our faces, along with nearly all the faces of the Pok  mon surrounding us. Right now, 'The Darkness Within' was playing, trying to outdo the Chameleon's band, whose name had long since escaped me.

\*\*\*\_Time to round them up, and tell them where we're gonna go,\_\*\*

\*\*\*\_If they don't know how to work it, don't let 'em break our flow!\_\*\*

\*\*\*\_Gotta make it to the center of the island, grab my hand,\_\*\*

\*\*\*\_Tell the DJ drop the beat,\_\*\*

\*\*\*\_Don't play some stupid human band!\_\*\*

Nova and I were both laughing, paw in paw, and dancing wildly across the sand. I was ridiculously clumsy on two legs, so he was supporting most of my weight as we flung each other across the shore. I could barely hear his laughter over the booming music.

\*\*\*\_Let it in your body,\_\*\*

\*\*\*\_And the party won't stop!\_\*\*

\*\*\*\_'Cause it's seven kinds of naughty,\_\*\*

\*\*\_When you let the beat drop!\_\*\*

\*\*\_I told it to you once\_\*\*

\*\*\_I said why don't you understand!?!\_\*\*

\*\*\_Tell the DJ drop the beat,\_\*\*

\*\*\_Don't play some stupid human band!\_\*\*

Suddenly I lost control, and I slipped out of Nova's grip. I was able to stop, but Nova spun around and smashed into a Raichu behind us. She turned around, and eyed Nova with a sultry gaze.

"Are you taken?" She purred, wrapping a coiled tail around his hind legs.

"Um, n-no?"

"You are now!" She smirked, and twirled him into her paws.

\*\*\_So give it to me baby,\_\*\*

\*\*\_Tell me what's it going to be?\_\*\*

\*\*\_Going to give it to me DIRTY\_\*\*\_\*\*out where everybody sees?\_\*\*\_

\*\*\_'Cause I can't do nothing with you,\_\*\*

\*\*\_If you're never going to dance!\_\*\*

\*\*\_So you better find some rhythm,\_\*\*

\*\*\_'Cause I'm not looking for romance!\_\*\*

I steamed, standing on the floor feeling useless. Nova just walked away! We were doing so well until that stupid Raichu came out of nowhere! Now Nova was all wrapped in that slut's tail as she twirled him around like a top. I ground my teeth, before a powerful sense of futility weighed me down.

\_This is the second time you've failed to capture his heart.\_

I grimaced, and hung my head. Tears burned at the corner of my eyes, and I was thankful that, unlike the others, I actually could make myself invisible.

\* \* \*

><p>(Static POV)<p>

I could still hear the bass from where I was, but it was just a small pounding compared to what everyone else must be feeling. As soon as I could, I snuck away from the others. There were other things on my mind.

Wigglytuff traced an outline on my stomach as I rested against a stump. I chuckled as she hit a ticklish spot, but otherwise let her

continue.

"I missed this." She giggled, drawing shapes in my unaligned fur.

"Me too. It feels like agesâ€¦"

"We're never \_alone \_anymore-"

"Always apart, or with others-"

"It's nice to-"

"-Yeah."

I grinned, and leaned forward, pressing my muzzle against hers. I didn't know what the others were doing, but I'm sure I was having a better time.

\_ 'Talking.\_ ' I laughed to myself. '\_Oh, Josh. Someday I'll teach you how to live.\_ '.

\* \* \*

><p>(Skarr POV)<p>

"You certainly took off quickly."

"I had no reason to stay."

"You and I have unfinished business, bladed one. Did you not wish to be beaten in front of a crowd?"

I smirked down at her from my tree branch. She grinned a toothy smile on the forest floor. "Truly, are you that wrathful for revenge?"

"I dislike it that you could endure where I would falter."

"And beating me in a duel that has nothing to do with endurance would make you feel adequate?"

"Yes."

I snorted a laugh, and the Charizard below me chuckled self-consciously.

"Come down here so I don't have to crane my neck." Charizard implored.

I flapped down. "Why, so you have an easier time consuming me?"

"I don't like the taste of cowardly metal." Charizard cackled.

"You've never tried me \_well done.\_" I quipped.

"Well, there's a first time for everything. Come a bit closer, will you?" Charizard feigned a lunge, and I flinched away. She laughed.

"Though honestly, we probably have the same endurance." I reasoned politely.

"What's your deduction behind that flawed piece of logic? I could barely move when we landed!"

"Well, to be fair you were carrying a larger load."

"Sandy is no bigger than Josh."

"I didn't mean the trainer-"

\_Skarr, you dolt! You did NOT just say that to a lady!\_

"You think I'm heavy." The Charizard snorted.

"\_No!\_" I backpedalled. "I just mean, you're bigger in \_size \_then I am, taller, more, uh, muscular and such."

The Charizard smirked. "Do I intimidate you, Skarmory?"

"I would be lying if I claimed you did not look fearsome." I reasoned.

Charizard was quiet for a moment. "You may call me Blaze."

"Oh. Okay." I said, a bit stunned.

"And I shall call you Razor."

"Um, that isn't my name." I blinked.

"Nor is Blaze my own." The Charizard shrugged.

"Why do you insist upon giving us false names?"

"Because I know you better than I know your kin." Blaze answered.

"Calling you 'Skarmory' tastes soâ€¦informal."

"And Razor has a nice \_edge \_to it, then?"

The Charizard snorted. "Perhaps a more childish name, fitting of your rancid puns."

I smirked back at her, my amber eyes gleaming in the moonlight. When was the last time I had the luxury of a conversation with such an eloquent female?

"Admiring the view?" Blaze scoffed when she caught me staring.

"Apologies; my mind was elsewhere."

"Evidently." Blaze smirked.

"Oh please. I am a gentlemen; I would never stoop to such lengths-"

"Oh stop. All men stop being \_gentle\_ after a certain hour." Blaze chuckled.

"That is untrue and sexist!" I retorted.

"Apologies." Blaze mocked, sizing me up with a sultry gaze. "My mind was elsewhere~"

I'm not completely sure what happened next, or even if we were genetically \_compatible, \_but once I felt her mouth on mine I didn't resist.

"Gentlemen \_indeed.\_" Blaze scoffed.

\* \* \*

><p>(Myst POV)<p>

I laid at the other end of the lake, quietly sulking. The loud bass was a contrast to my quiet displeasure as I glared at the enthusiastic crowd.

For far too long had I watched that stupid Raichu dance with Nova, occasionally shocking him with her tail, and laughing coyly every time he jumped. It was disgusting.

"Hey Myst! Enjoying the party?" Someone said behind me. I turned around to see Static and Wigglytuff walking up.

"Hardly." I slurped another mouthful of the burning lake. "How'd you even find me?"

"Your coat was hard to see, but your eyes weren't." Static shrugged. "Bright red and all. Plus you kept looking in our direction."

"I wasn't looking at you."

"Then who \_were \_you looking at?"

I sighed, taking another sip. "It's not important."

"Ooooh~! I know that look!" Wigglytuff chirped, running towards me. "Who's the lucky guy?"

"Go away." I shoved her aside.

"Feisty!" Wiggly's large eyes gleamed with interest. "Details! Did you ask him to dance? What happened?"

"\_Nothing\_ happened." I growled.

"Ooooh, rejection then?" Wiggly winced in sympathy, but grinned.

"Notâ€|exactlyâ€|" I murmured.

"Details!" Wigglytuff's tiny paws waved in the air.

"Fine, fine. Um, we were dancing, and we stopped sort of, then he went to dance with someone else."

"That's not too bad!" Static chimed. "Once he was done, did you ask

him to dance again?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

I sighed, recalling our dance. "I just don't think he would want to."

"You can dance if you want to!" Wigglytuff grinned. "You can leave your friends behind!"

Static grabbed her hands, and swung her around in a circle.

"'Cause your friends don't dance, and if they don't dance-"

"-Well they're no friends of mine!" The duo finished, giggling.

"Funny." I grimaced.

"Well, who's the lucky guy?" Wigglytuff's paws ruffled my coat. "Maybe we can help?"

"I don't think confrontation would be best with him!"

"Just tell us who it is!"

"Nova." I mumbled.

Wigglytuff and Static stood silent for a moment, before Static doubled over with laughter.

"\_What!?" I demanded, outraged.

"NOVA?" Static asked between giggles. "I mean, I know your options are limited with me being taken and all, but \_Nova?\_"

"I thought you would go after Skarr, personally." Wiggly shrugged.

"No! Skarr is too jaded. Nova's kind and intelligent, naïve, and!" I trailed off, blushing.

"You have a thing for \_Nooooova~!" Static cackled.

"So what!?" I bristled.

"So, go and get him!" Static encouraged with a sweep of his hand. "You have the advantage here! He \_knows \_you, he doesn't know the person he's dancing with."

"Yeah!" Wigglytuff added. "Go over there, beat up whoever took your spot, and tell Nova how you feel!"

"You know what? You're both right!" I stood up, wobbling slightly. "I'm going to go over there and get Nova back!"

"Yeah!" The duo cheered.

And I stomped over to the other side of the lake, my face flushed with a light pink, and a determined glare in my fierce, red eyes.

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

"Heyâ€|so, do you wanna, you know, get out of here?"

"W-what?"

"I've never been with a fire-breather before." The Raichu purred, her jolting tail trailing behind her.

"W-what do you mean?"

"Making electricity." Her tail crackled, as she moved towards me predatorily.

"I, um, I don't know how-"

"I'll teach you." Her tail coiled around one of my legs, trapping me in place. With a sultry gaze she placed her paw on my chest, and another behind me. Her breath felt hot against my face, and smelled of strongly of the fermented lake. Slowly she closed the distance between us, but despite my squirming she held me firmly in place.

"\_Hey! \_Get off him you \*\*\_bitch\_\*\*!" I heard a scream in the crowd. The Raichu whipped around, outraged. Myst stood a few feet away bristling as dark energy pulsing around her.

"What did you just call me!?" Raichu spat.

\_Myst! What are you doing!?!\_

\* \* \*

><p>(Myst POV)<p>

"I called you a \_bitch.\_"

She was over twice my height, and the reach of her tail was double the size of my entire body. She stood up on her hind legs, and I noticed her coat had no traces of dust or debris.

'\_She must be a trainer's PokÃ©mon.\_' I reasoned. '\_And a pampered one at that.\_'

She lunged towards my illusion, but struck nothing but air. I reappeared behind her and bashed her with my fist.

"Arrgh!" She cried, and lashed out with her tail. It struck me in my throat, and I recoiled, wincing. She grimaced, her electric pouches crackling angrily, preparing to strike.

Just as the electricity bolted for me, I struck with my own black energy. It smashed against her fur, and caused her to fall to the forest floor. She didn't get up.

I brushed myself off, and for once, noticed my disheveled state. My coat was a mess of dirt and grass, and I hadn't groomed myself since the previous night. My fur stood up at odd angles, and I looked wilder than half the actual \_wild \_PokÃ©mon here.

Nova looked awkwardly at the fainted Raichu, then back towards me.  
"Umâ€¦"

I raced up and tried to press my muzzle to his, but he held me back with a forceful paw.

"What are you doing?" He asked, his normally timid eyes devoid of fear, and filled with a cool blue anger.

"Iâ€¦I wanted to dance with you." I mumbled.

"Then you should have said something earlier." Nova barked. "You just knocked out the person I was dancing with! You could have just waited."

Even though the haze of alcohol, I felt a pit at the base of my stomach. I bowed, ashamed.

"Don't be sad!" Nova chirped, lightly grabbing my paw. "Just be more careful! Here, we can dance now, okay? No tearsâ€¦"

Nova lifted me up on my hind legs, and started a clumsy waltz, even though there was no music. I shuddered at the heat of his face on mine. At last, I couldn't stand it, and I turned to kiss him as he leaned down, supporting me with his arm.

Unfortunately, he had more leverage, and simply lowered me slightly to avoid the kiss. I blinked, and looked back at him with a hurt, haughty expression.

"Not now." Nova shook his head, the fire in his eyes returning.

"Why?" I pouted, injured by his rejection.

"Because the Lake is making you act like this." Nova shook his head. "You wouldn't be like this normally. If you kiss me now, it'll be meaningless."

"As if the lake could conjure a hundred memories of us rolling carefree in the grass, and render them 'meaningless'."

Nova blinked at my recollection, surprised at my lucidity.

"As if the lake could recreate a month's full of memories, of wanting you by my side." I continued, tears once again burning in the corner of my eyes.

"Thisâ€¦this isn't recent?" Nova stared quietly, his timid sapphire eyes once again adorning his face.

"Noâ€¦" I closed the distance between us, and supported myself on my back legs by placing my front legs on his chest.



"And this isn't the Lakeâ€|?" Nova whispered, his hot breath warming my cheeks.

"No amount of the Lake could make this act meaningless." I whispered in reply, and pressed my mouth to his. This time he didn't resist, and supported me with a paw, stabilizing my awkward positioning.

"WOOHOO! GET SOME!" Someone in the crowd laughed. I responded with a raised middle claw to them behind Nova's back.

"And you'll promise you'll remember this tomorrow?" Nova asked hesitantly, breaking from the kiss.

"I couldn't forget this even if I wanted to." I smiled, eager to taste his lips once more.

## 21. Picking up the pieces

"\*\*\_And GIVE IT UP for the Darkness Withiiiiin!\_\*\*" the Charmeleon boomed once more, and we all screamed in approval as a Scrafty, a Murkrow, two Loudred, and a Spiritomb took the stage.

"\*\*\_Thank you, thank you!\_\*\*" The Scrafty grinned, soaking in the approval from the roaring mass. \_"\_\_\*\*This one's a tribute to Darkrai, as we wish You success on your quest for vengeance.\*\*\_" The Scrafty took a deep breath.

\*\*\_A warning, to the people,\_\*\*

\*\*\_The good and the evil,\_\*\*

\*\*\_This is warâ€|\_\*\*

The song started slowly, with the Loudred only giving off a fraction of their pulsating sound. It was a hauntingly quiet melody, but it still inspired action. I could feel it building up, and the tension was palpable in the crowd.

\*\*\_It's the moment of truth, the moment to lie,\_\*\*

\*\*\_The moment to live and the moment to die!\_\*\*

\*\*\_It's the moment to fight, the moment to fight.\_\*\*

\*\*\_To fight! To fight! To FIIIIIGHT!\_\*\*

Everyone shook to the beat of the song, but the dark PokÃ©mon in the audience especially felt a connection to the music. Even I felt a strong kinship towards it as I danced with Nova. A shadowy figure emerged on the island, with glowing red eyes and dripping shadow.

\*\*\_To Our Leader! Our Pariah!\_\*\*

\*\*\_To Darkrai, our Messiah!\_\*\*

\*\*\_This is war!\_\*\*

Darkrai emerged, though I could tell it was just an illusion. The Darkrai battled the aberration in a force of illusionary strength.

\*\*\_To the right! To the left!\_\*\*

\*\*\_We will fight to the death!\_\*\*

\*\*\_To the edge of the earth!\_\*\*

\*\*\_It's a brave new worrrrrrld!\_\*\*

At last the aberration was destroyed as the Darkrai ripped off its head. Fake blood dripped from the wound, and the Darkrai consumed it in a gristly display.

\*\*\_I do believe, in the night,\_\*\*

\*\*\_Raise your paws into the sky,\_\*\*

\*\*\_The fight is done,\_\*\*

\*\*\_The war is won,\_\*\*

\*\*\_Lift your paws up towards the One.\_\*\*

As a collective crowd, we all raised our hands to the bloody Darkrai. The Darkrai roared in approval, and disappeared into a puff of shadow.

\*\*\_The War is won,\_\*\*

\*\*\_The War is won!\_\*\*

"Cool song." Nova grinned, right before he was sideswiped by Skarr's wing. Skarr crash landed a few feet away, leaving a clean scar down Nova's cheek. Skarr quickly recovered, eyeing both Nova and myself with wild, crazed eyes.

"Apologies!" He screamed, looking at the slice across Nova's face. "We must leave. \_NOW.\_"

"Why? What happened?" I asked, confused.

A crash reverberated right behind me as I felt the Charizard land.

"That was a reenactment." Skarr winced, already preparing to take off.

"Of what!?" I demanded.

"The death of Nightshade." Skarr swallowed, hard. "At the hands of Darkrai."

"You think-"

"I \_KNOW!\_" Skarr yelped, his normally stoic eyes wide with fear. "Josh is in danger! You both get the others, and we'll meet where we left Josh. From there we'll meet and find him!"

Charizard and Skarr took to the air. I went to give Nova a confused look, but he wasn't there.

"Come on!" He cried, already starting to run. "We need to find the others!"

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV, twelve hours earlier)<p>

Sandy grinned ear to ear. I already regretted telling her about my plans for tonight, and I could see her mocking smile stretch across her face.

"So, you excited for your \_date\_?"

"It's not a date." I groaned, walking with Sandy in the sunlight forest.

"Two guys at a play. It's going to be so romantic." Sandy grinned her evil grin. "The lights will be dimmed low; just you and him, with his hand lying haphazardly on the arm restâ€|maybe you'll both bump into each other by accident, blush a bit, apologizeâ€|"

"I'm not gay!"

"I didn't say you were." Sandy smirked. "Uh-oh. Am I pressing against repressed feelings?"

"Auuughhhhâ€|"

"It's okay. You can tell me \_anything.\_"

"You know, for being my girlfriend, you sure are open to me dating other people." I deadpanned.

"Only guys." Sandy corrected, twirling her hair with a finger. "If you dated another girl I'd be jealous. But if you brought another guy home, who knows~"

I rolled my eyes.

"So what's he \_liiikkeeeeâ€|?\_"

"I don't know!" I stomped my foot childishly. "I just know he's a good trainer and that he likes plays! I didn't want to go aloneâ€|" I trailed off.

"So, we talking blond, red-headâ€|?" Sandy prodded.

"I'm not \_GAY FOR ETHAN!\_" I shouted. Sandy cackled.

"Alright, alright, I'll stop." Sandy's grin slowly faded. "But, you have to answer something for me."

"Fine, what?" I sighed, exasperated.

"Why don't you want Static to evolve?"

I hadn't expected that question, and I was completely caught. My eyes widened, and my mind completely blanked.

"You kind of freaked today." Sandy bit the inside of her cheek in thought. "I mean, I lied for you, but I didn't even know why. And that's \_fine, \_I trust you, butâ€¦I suppose I want to know the reason."

"â€¦Wow." I exhaled. "Um, yeah, I guess I owe you an explanation, huh? I justâ€¦" I took a breath to calm my nerves. "I suppose I haven't told anyone this, even Static. And I tell Static \_everything.\_"

"Well, go on." Sandy encouraged.

I puffed out my cheeks. "Alright. Ever since I caught Static â€¦" using the word 'caught' loosely â€¦" he's always been fiercely competitive. We meshed together perfectly even from the start, and we would stay up late training and improving. Even from the beginning he was always impatient to evolve. To get better, stronger. And I would always tell him no."

"Why?" Sandy asked.

"Well, back then, because of his moves." I shrugged. "If he evolved at a low level, he would have bad moves as a Raichu. He needed to get more experience before evolving."

"But now he's over level sixty." Sandy replied.

"â€¦Yes." I admitted, albeit reluctantly.

"Soâ€¦? Why haven't you evolved him?"

"Well, things got moreâ€¦complicated over time." I frowned.

"Explain?"

"I learned more about PokÃ©mon statistics over time. Static and I got closer. I didn't see him as a pet anymore, or even as a PokÃ©mon. I saw him as an equal, a friend. I liked spending time with him, even when it wasn't training. I liked when he would climb up on my shoulder, or take naps in my backpack. As a Raichu, all of that would change."

"You don't know that for certain." Sandy accused.

"Except I \_do!\_ As a Raichu, all of Static's moves would be terrible! Even if he could hit harder and be faster, Static wouldn't have the advantage of his light ball anymore. That means as a Raichu, he would actually be \_slower \_and hit \_weaker\_. He could learn new moves sure, but none that were worth replacing. He would be too heavy to carry and to fit in my backpack, and worst of all, he would \_change, \_mentally. He wouldn't be the same Static that I grew up with, fed, played with, and loved. He would be something else, somethingâ€¦different. After what happened with Overdose-"

"Static wouldn't end up like him." Sandy cut me off.

"-But everyone \_knows \_Pikachu get more aggressive when they evolve! You already know how he gets if he doesn't battle every so often. Picture that all the time! He wouldn't be the sameâ€¦" I sighed, and looked down at the fresh grass.

"You don't know that."

"I know that Static doesn't know that."

"What?" Sandy gave me a quizzical look.

"Listen. Static isn't the best at planning ahead. He's smart, butâ€¦he's not always in the moment."

"What do you mean?"

"Static wants to evolve because he wants to be stronger. He wants to improve, to get better. He doesn't realize that evolving would actually make him worse. Or that he couldn't sleep in my backpack anymore, or that he might be angry \_all the time, \_or he could change into a totally different person. He wouldn't want to evolve if he knewâ€¦"

"You don't have the right to decide that for him." Sandy said quietly. Her words hurt because they rang with truth.

I winced. "Would it be better if I evolved him, and he regretted it the rest of his life?"

Sandy gave me a cool, silent stare. It wasn't anger or repulsion, more ofâ€¦disappointment. "It would be better if you gave him the choice, and presented your perspective."

"You're not supposed to be the smart one." I pouted.

"I'm not." Sandy gave me a weary grin. "You already knew that."

"Yeah, well-"

"Hey!" Sandy said suddenly, giving me a quick kiss on the cheek. "I really \_do \_have to leave. I have a battle at six, not an \_important\_one per say\_, \_but I do have to be there."

I stared at her for a long moment. "How are you going to get there?"

"Fly? Duh." Sandy shrugged.

"Onâ€¦?"

"On my Charizard?" Sandy gave me an odd look. Suddenly her eyes flew open. "SHIT! Charizard's with \_your Pokemon at the lake!\_I'm going to miss my battle! It's supposed to be \_TELEVISED!\_"

"Okay, calm down." I reasoned. "There are other ways to get to the islands. Maybe by boat? Plane?"

"No wait, I'm fine." Sandy sighed, relieved. "I can just get another flying type out of the computer. Wow, it's just been so long since

I've even touched the P.C." Sandy laughed.

Personally I never liked the idea of putting Pok  mon in a computer. They've described it as similar to being in a Pok  ball, but to me it seems so   impersonal. As if Pok  mon could be reduced to bits of data. I especially disliked the idea of someone owning dozens of Pok  mon. Perchance forgetting about one or two, and letting years go by without giving it food, or sunlight. I shuttered.

Still, in her case it was different. She wasn't the one who owned these Pok  mon after all; she was just allowed to use them. The Battle Factory itself was the one that rented these, and she merely had access.

"So, where's the nearest center, then?" I asked.

"  From here? Maybe  Vermilion?"

"That's nearly ten miles!"

"I'm in shape!" Sandy smirked, jumping in place.

"It's nearly noon! And it'll take you at least four hours to fly there. You think we can run ten miles in two hours?"

"Not us; you have a date to catch." Sandy stuck out her tongue.

"Oh. I feel bad leaving you to run ten miles without any Pok  mon. Are you sur-"

"I'll be fine." Sandy waved me off.

"Are you \_sure?\_ I don't want you getting hurt-"

"You'll just have to make it up some other way sometime." Sandy kissed me quickly, threw on her pack, and hopped in place. "Alright, see you! Text me how your\_ date \_goes!"

"Will d-, auuugh." I groaned. Sandy ran away, laughing.

"See you!" She yelled, already tearing through the sparse forest.

"See you." I grinned, my voice echoing through the trees.

\* \* \*

><p>Silence, only broken by the soft turn of a page. The wrinkle of paper, and the light wind against my face. How long had it been since I had the luxury of a good book?<p>

My attention flicked to my wrist, and onto my ever moving watch. It was nearly time for the play, but I still had a few minutes left. Satisfied, I continued reading.

\* \* \*

><p>"Sorry I'm late!" I panted. Ethan stood nonchalantly by the door, the dark circles around his eyes ever present.<p>

"You're not late; the show doesn't start for another ten minutes."  
Ethan shrugged noncommittally.

"Yeah, but I like getting to places early. I just lost track of time." I lied. Honestly I just didn't want to stop reading until the last possible second.

"Don't worry about it. Take a second to catch your breath, and then we'll find our seats."

I was excited, despite my reluctance to leave my precious books. The play's narrative was one I hadn't seen before, and it was one I was eager to finally experience. I knew the battles likely wouldn't be very entertaining, but you do what you can.

After a moment, Ethan and I found our seats.

"You know what's the best about these types of plays?" Ethan nudged me.

"What?"

"No singing." He laughed lightly, flicking through his program.

"Oh I disagree." I pouted. "Music can really add to a performance!"

"Some performances." Ethan pointed out. "And some really can pull it off, but others are simply nauseating. Especially the ones that try to incorporate Pokémon for the vocals. I know it's racist, but unless the Pokémon singing is an instrument itself — like Chimecho or Bronzong or something — it's going to turn out poorly. I can only hear something say the same word over and over before it becomes nauseating."

"Eh. Some Pokémon can become background vocals nicely." I argued. "And the world would have a lot more insomniacs if people hadn't recorded all those Jigglypuff albums."

"Uhh, don't mention insomnia." Ethan groaned. The room darkened gradually, and a hush fell over the audience. Slowly an orchestra began to play, and bright lights adorned the stage.

\* \* \*

><p>(Overdose POV)<p>

[I used to still see him, you know. My trainer. It's difficult, not — not having him around anymore. There are some days where I think it would be nicer if I still saw him around, even if he wasn't real. Just his — image, the feeling of him there. It's — nice.] The Munchlax bowed his head quietly.

He had trouble taking his medication for stress-induced schizophrenia. The kid saw his trainer die, just a spray of blood and an ambulance. No one should have to go through that.

No one could blame him for going a bit insane.

[Thank you, Lax.] Nora nodded. She was our nurse and therapist, and

sat with us all during these sessions. The Munchlax bowed his head, swallowing the more intense emotions going through his mind. Everyone in the circle clapped, but not the clapping of amusement, or happiness. It was recognition; he had \_accomplished \_something. He had taken the first steps towards recovery, and was, slowly, fixing himself. Picking back up the pieces that had shattered on that fateful day.

[Overdose? Would you like to say anything?]

I had never spoken to Nora, or to any of the facility for that matter. Yet, her tone wasn't mocking or belittling, it wasâ€|

â€|Patient.

I shook my head.

[Alright, this was a productive session everyone!] Nora smiled, clapping her hands together. [I'll see you all tomorrow, same time. Thanks for sharing everyone! Oh, and Overdose.] Nora turned her attention to me just as I was leaving the room. [I would like to talk to you about your medication.]

\_Talk. \_I would've laughed in her face, but I wasn't in the mood.

[Right now you are being force-fed medication that prevent you from hurting the staff.] The nurse reiterated. [Are you okay with that?]

I wasn't. At first I fought them with everything I had and they had to put me under in order for me to take the meds. After the first week though, I just accepted it. I couldn't stop them anyway.

I shrugged.

[You haven't shown any aggressive nature recently.] the nurse noted. I stared back with hollow, black eyes. [Do you think you still need the medication?]

I didn't really care. I wasn't in the mood to hurt anyone anyway. I shrugged again.

[Why won't you talk, Overdose?] The nurse pondered, tilting her head at me with curiosity. [You talked on the way here. We know you can. Volt says you talk to him in your room. Why won't you talk to me?]

\_It's not about \_you\_. It's about what you represent. What you are trying to accomplish. My silence isn't directed at you; if anything, you'reâ€|\_

\_You're helping. Why don't you see that?\_

[You're strong, Overdose.] The nurse nodded. [I just wish-]

[I'm not strong.] I laughed, interrupting her. I couldn't help myself; the phrase was just too absurd.



The nurse blinked, surprised at hearing my thoughts. I don't think she had ever heard them before.

[I'm not strong. If I was, I wouldn't be here.] I replied simply, letting my eyes glaze over.

[Why don't you think you're strong?] the nurse asked, bringing up a chair.

I shrugged again.

[Come on.] Nora prodded. [I like talking with you. I want know more. Please?]

I smirked. I hated this place, I hated the staff, butâ€¦I didn't hate her. She actually seemed to care about us, about all of our problems and messed up lives. She cared about me.

[â€¦Sure.] I relented, looking away.

[Why don't you think you're strong?] She asked again, patiently.

[Justâ€¦because, I guess.] I grimaced.

[Because you're here?] the nurse questioned.

[Because I don't talk.] I responded. I didn't expect to say that, it just did.

[Why does that make you weak?]

[Because I don't want to talk. I don't want to acknowledge you, or anyone else. That makes you real. That makes all of this real.] I took a slow breath.

[Why don't you want this to be real?]

[Because if it's real, that means all of this has \_happened. \_That means Munchlax' trainer really \_did \_die, that means Volt really \_is\_messed up, and that means I'm \_also \_messed up, I'm \_broken, \_and all those people I hurt, those people, all of them, \_oh god\_â€¦] I dry heaved as warm tears hit my paw, and I realized I was shielding my face.

[It's okay.] The nurse wrapped her arm around me. I pushed it off instinctively, and flinched away.

[How is this '\_okay\_'!?] I laughed a sickeningly broken laugh, mixed with sobs. [I \_hurt \_people! I snapped their bones, made them bleed, and made them \_beg \_for me to end them! How-] I gagged again, quickly covering my mouth with a paw.

After a moment it stopped, and I was able to calm myself back down.

[How can any of this \_ever\_ be okay?] I asked simply, thoughts shaking with sobs. [I'm defined by sin. My name conjures thoughts of suicide. I \_am\_ evil; I \_am\_ \_pain, suffering, and sadism. I'm sure I \_killed \_people down there. There isn't coming back from this. The

only good now is ridding the world of this terrible person I've-

[Don't talk like that.] the nurse scolded.

[It's true!] I yelled, exasperated.

[You don't have to be defined by your past.]

[You don't know] whatever thoughts I had were lost in a sea of sobs. I couldn't help shaking, and kept repeating 'you don't know' as I shivered in her arms. How could she know? How could she hold me if she knew the damage I had caused? How could she help someone like me, who had ruined so many lives? Who had caused so much misery, and who has brought so much pain into the world?

How could she, how could anyone help me?

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

The lights nearly blinded me, jolting everyone out of the immersion of the play. The intermission. I blinked and stretched in my seat, and Ethan let out a large yawn.

The play had been excellent so far. It was about a trainer whom had accidentally been injured in a fight, and been put into a coma. His Pokémon had agreed to quest for him, and to earn badges without their trainer at all. A Ditto was the team's leader, and he took the shape and guise of the trainer at gyms. The intermission occurred right when the trainer's health had taken a turn for the worst, just after his team had obtained all eight badges.

I looked at Ethan. His eyes were half closed, and he looked displeased.

"Hey, you like the play?" I prodded.

"Yeah, it's great." He shrugged in a low monotone. He said it with such a lack of enthusiasm that it could've been mistaken for sarcasm.

"You look a bit tired."

Ethan turned to me and snorted a laugh. "Yeah, that's what not sleeping for four days'll do to you."

"What!?"

"I have night terrors." Ethan turned away and rubbed his eyes. "It's recent; I don't know what brought it on. The first few nights were terrible; I felt myself ripped in half, crushed by two opposing walls, drown, burn alive in magma" He shuttered. "I know I need to sleep, but my body just won't let me. It knows what waits when I close my eyes."

"Did anything particularly traumatic happen to you recently?" I asked.

"No! Nothing. I had a bad hot dog a few days ago, but that was it!" Ethan looked down angrily. "It's gotten to the point where I need to just bite the bullet and by some sleep powder for myself. I know the nightmares will be terrible, but it beats not sleeping."

"Maybe you can hire a trainer with a psychic type to get rid of your dreams?" I suggested.

"Hey, now that's a thought." Ethan nodded. "Do you know of anyone around here with a Pokémon that knows Dream Eater?"

"Not off the top of my head." I frowned.

"No worries; the Dream Eater thing was still an awesome idea." Ethan offered. "What time is it?"

"We probably have five minutes left in the intermission."

"Enough for a small nap?" Ethan mumbled closing his eyes. "Wake me when the play starts, will you?"

\* \* \*

><p>"Then shall death itself be undone!"<p>

"Stop, you fool! You don't understand what wrath you could possibly be provoking!"

"Don't interrupt me! If he can't wake up by himself then we'll do it by force!"

"Those runes! You plan on waking Darkrai!? You can't comprehend his power! Don't complete the--"

"\*\*\_YOU RANG?\_" A wave of terror struck my gut, and made me double over in surprise. Ethan screamed, and dove under his seat. The actors stood in mid-scene, staring at the dark entity that had materialized in front of them. Someone in the pit crew bolted towards the exit.

"\*\*\_May the one who callsss himssself 'NightSsshade' pleassse come forward.\_\*\*" The entity asked politely, his glowing red eyes scanning over the quivering audience. "\*\*\_Come now. Not \_\*\*\*\*all\*\*\*\*\_ of you need die tonight.\_\*\*"

\_Why was he looking for me? What had I done!?!\_

The actors on stage ran for behind the curtains. The black mist smirked, and then snapped his fingers. All of the doors sealed themselves, and all of the lights shut off in sync to the sound of shattering glass. A certain purple light emanated from the being himself, allowing us scarcely enough light to see.

"\*\*\_I grow weary ssssearching for the one that mocks the darknessssssâ€¦\_\*\*" The entity droned, looking over the audience once more. "\*\*\_â€¦and I'm going to ssstart killing. Ssshall I ssstart with the back row, or front?\_\*\*"

I stood up. The entire audience turned to look at me, including the black aberration. I cringed, knowing that this would be how I die. I

didn't even have Pokémon to defend me.

The being slowly brought two of its misty appendages together, creating a mocking, slow clap. **Bravo, hero.** Sssacrificing your life so that otherssss may live. Truly noble. Come up here, will you? I want everyone to remember your face.

Somehow despite the wobbling in my knees I made my way to the stage. With every step I felt the growing fear writhing in my gut. I ground my teeth and stepped on the stage.

**Behold! Your sssavior.** Darkrai's mocking tone echoed through the auditorium. **Any last wordsss for our membersss in the audience?**

I shook my head, petrified.

**Very well.** The doors to the auditorium swung open. **The ressst of you may leave. For thossse that wish to watch the after ssshow however, feel free to sssstay and watch...**

Everyone fled, save Ethan, whom I saw hiding from behind a chair. Darkrai smirked, and turned to me again.

**Do you fear me, NightSsshade?** The black being pondered, running a very real black bladed finger across my throat. **Do you fear the darknesssss?**

"Yes." I choked.

**Do you fear death?** He asked, tilting his head curiously.

"Y-yes." I answered.

**Good. You should fear both.** Darkrai drew back his hand, pulsing with black energy. **They're not mutually excludssive.**

Suddenly a shoe collided with Darkrai's head, and bounced to a halt. The shadow whirled to face the culprit just as another shoe struck his face.

"RUN, YOU IDIOT!" Ethan screamed, shoeless, and also running for the exit.

I turned to bolt, but Darkrai snatched the cuff of my shirt, choking me and holding me in place. With his second hand, he directed his dark energy to Ethan, and pulled him onto the stage.

**And now you both mussst die.** Darkrai held us immobile with one hand, and created a floating, serrated black sword with his other. **Goodnight, NightSsshade and his friend. Ssssweet dreamsss.**

\* \* \*

><p>I waited a terrible second. Then another. After what seemed like an eternity I looked up, but didn't see Darkrai. In his place, a

beautiful angel floated effortlessly, glowing with radiant pink light. It lacked wings, instead favoring two large pointed ears, and a flowing pink tail.<p>

"Wâ€|whatâ€|?" I murmured, looking up in wonder at the radiant creature.

[You failed.] It replied simply, looking down at me with dull, azure eyes. It didn't escape my notice that it was able to talk with me despite the fact that I \_wasn't \_wearing my Pokespeak.

"What?" Ethan asked, blinking as if he came out of a dream.

[He failed.] the new, pink entity explained, pointing a paw at me.

"What do you mean I failed?" I asked, feeling a bit of my confidence return.

[Well, you were brave, which was a plus. Very inspiring.] The being's pink tail whipped back and forth. [But you would have died. And that's a big 'F'. You were supposed to use the Masterball on me.]

I blinked. "What?"

[What? What? What?] The creature mocked, flailing it's arms. It giggled softly afterwards; its laughter sounded melodic, like a harp. [You sound like newborns.]

[What are you?]

[I am the nine hundred and seventieth rendition. I am one of the Ancients. I serve as Mewtwo's right hand in securing the peace between PokÃ©mon and humans, and ensuring the treaty forged between us does not go awry. I am the origin, the spark; I am what allowed for life to exist on this planet. I am creation.]

The being pressed it's forehead to my own, and laughed when I shrunk away. [But you, Josh? You can just call me Mew.]

\* \* \*

><p>"Mew!?" Ethan blinked, recoiling.<p>

"Why have you come?" I asked, trying to sound braver than I felt.

[The Masterball serves as aâ€|deterrentâ€|for the peace between our kinds.] Mew floated away, distracted by a speck of light. [The Ancients â€" Arceus, Mewtwo, Kyogre, Groudon, Rayuazaâ€|] Mew waved its paw lazily. [You get the idea. Each has untold power. If a human were to control and command one of us without our permission, they could wreak havoc onto the world. Mewtwo alone could destroy entire cities! Much less Kyogre or Groudon, either of which could destroy the entire world if they so desired.]

"You would have the Masterball destroyed, then?" I clarified. Mew grinned, and wagged a finger at me.

[Not so fast.] It purred, eyeing its tail. [We can't just blatantly

destroy such valuable human technology, can we? It would present us in a bad light to the public, and it would violate the Treaty of Concord.]

Mew began floating in circles, chasing its own tail.

"Um." I interjected. It was hard to take Mew seriously, even though it did have valid and intelligent points. "So then, what is your plan?"

[Deactivate the Masterball.] Mew finally caught its tail, and nibbled on the end of it triumphantly.

"But doesn't that count as destroying it?" I pondered.

"Yeah, hacking it wouldn't solve anything." Ethan interjected.

[Not hacking, \_deactivate.\_ Have it capture a PokÃ©mon, and thus revert back to being a regular PokÃ©ball.]

"So you plan to make me capture a random PokÃ©mon?" I asked. "That doesn't solve-"

"Wait, you have a Masterball?" Ethan looked at me incredulously.

"Yeah."

"How did you even-"

[Not important now.] Mew interrupted. [Now, this is only the first dilemma. The second is your guise as NightShade. Darkrai actually \_does \_intend on killing you for that, you know. He views it as you mocking him.] Mew frowned. [And unfortunately for you, he's \_much \_less theatrical than little old me.]

"You're \_NightShade too!?" Ethan deadpanned.

"Later!" I hissed, and then turned back to Mew. "What do you suggest, then? How can I defend myself?"

[Well, according to our treaty, Darkrai actually isn't allowed to harm you, or \_any \_human. This transgression he is planning directly contradicts our treaty, and puts peace between humans and PokÃ©mon in jeopardy. In fact, he's been stalking you for a few days now, resting near Ethan's residence.]

"Wait, what?" Ethan blinked angrily.

"Soâ€¦what is your plan?" I asked.

[Two birds.] Mew's eyes grew misty. "This iteration of myself must act as a sacrifice."

"I'm sorry?"

[We have two problems. One, the Masterball must catch one PokÃ©mon of the wielder's choice. Two, Darkrai must \_not \_succeed in killing you. I was the obvious choice; as I am forever in a cycle of rebirth. This life must be given into servitude to protect the treaty, and through

it, Pokémon and humankind.]

I was silent for a long time as I processed what had been said.

"So he's going to capture you, then?" Ethan clarified.

[Yes.] Mew nodded.

"Wow." Ethan reeled.

"I thank you for your offer," I began. "but I won't enslave one of the Ancients simply because it is within my power. If you wish to protect me I would welcome your assistance, but I don't plan on forcing you to live with me if it is not what you wish. Protect me and a deal is struck; I'll break the Masterball myself once Darkrai isn't a threat to us anymore."

Mew smiled. The very air around us seemed to warm, like a fireplace on a cool, winter's night.

"So?" I prodded, after a moment of silence.

[So? You passed.] Mew grinned, laughing its melodious laugh. [Turns out, you didn't even fail in the first place.]

## 22. The Gift of Rain

[You are sleep deprived.]

We walked out of the Pokémon Pageant, which was completely deserted. A part of me wondered if I would be responsible for damages, since the Pokémon that had caused mass chaos and panic was technically my own. Oops.

"Yup." Ethan answered, nodding sleepily.

[I can help you with that, if you wish.] Mew offered.

"How?"

Mew let out a large yawn. I instantly recognized what was happening, and shut my eyes and smashed my hands over my ears. Ethan wasn't so lucky. He looked at Mew inquisitively before letting out a yawn in turn.

and then fell to the floor, unconscious.

Mew looked at me with confusion when I opened my eyes again.

[I wasn't aiming for you.] It said simply.

"Ethan could've been hurt!" I berated.

[Nuh-ah.] Mew countered. [I caught him.]

Sure enough, Ethan was floating slightly above the ground.

"â€|Still. You have to ask people before you do things like that." I frowned.

[He was badly sleep deprived. Ethan had no business making choices for himself. Did you know that long term sleep deprivation is fatal in humans?]

"That'sâ€|that's for a really long time. Like, weeks-"

[With proper care and nutrition, death will occur in eleven days, two hours, three minutes, and four seconds.] Mew rattled. [For a male of your size, if you choose to stop sleeping.]

"We were talking about Ethan-"

[For Ethan, the time was reduced to six days, twelve hours, and eighteen minutes exactly.] Mew nodded. [Normally he could last longer, but he was not as well-nourished as you.]

"Well-nourished?" Suddenly I became self-conscious. "What do you mean?"

[For someone of your current age, you eat better than eighty seven percent of the population, however, you eat less fruits than ninety nine of the population, and are currently slightly dehydrated. Given your current diet, you will contract scurvy in thirteen years, twenty seven days, and nineteen hours, with a margin of error of less than two point eight seven percent.]

\_Well, I did give most of my fruits to Static. He always did like them more than I did.\_

I shook my head, clearing my thoughts. "Wait. What are we going to do with Ethan? He's unconscious; we can't just leave him-"

[His house is point nine three of your miles away, in that direction.] Mew pointed behind the PokÃ©mon pageant.

"How do you know all of this?" I frowned, concerned.

[I have existed through several cycles of life. I retain fragments of memories of past lives, which are compiled in my current outlook.]

"I mean like, the specifics. My diet, and Ethan's house."

[I read your minds.]

"That is \_NOT OKAY-\_"

I bit my tongue. It was hard not to belittle Mew; I kept having to remind myself that it was more powerful than I could possibly image, even if in this form it \_could\_, in theory, be beaten. I swallowed my criticism of mind-reading, and we continued carrying Ethan. Or rather, Mew continued carrying Ethan with telekinesis.

[Calm yourself; I learned early on about the privacy of mortals, and how much it means to them. I will not delve where it would be inappropriate to do so.]



"Oh. Well, okay thenâ€|"

[Really? "Just talked"? That's how you explain what you and Sandy do to Static?] Mew laughed harmoniously.

"Hey! Don't do that!" I blushed fiercely, glaring at Mew. "Those thoughts are personal!"

"I'm a god." Mew grinned. "And the world is my playground. I do as I wish, for none will oppose me."

"Yeah, wellâ€|I'm your trainer."

Mew looked at me, smirking with its turquoise eyes. It didn't challenge my statement, and politely waited for me to continue.

"And I'm telling you that it's rude, to, umâ€|"

Mew still didn't interrupt, and stared at me curiously.

"â€|to read people without their permission."

Mew floated silently beside me for a moment. [You fashion yourself as my trainer, then?]

"â€|Yes." I nodded.

[You think you own me?]

I choose my words carefully. "â€|I think we have similar ideals, andâ€|we would be better as partners."

[You think you can control me?]

"I don't think anything can control you but you." I spoke honestly. I was rewarded with another musical laugh.

[You choose your words carefully.] Mew noted, looking around the darkened city curiously as we passed through.

"I know their power." I shrugged. "To wound and to mend, to cut, to heal."

We got to Ethan's house, and I tried the door.

"Locked." I grimaced.

[The second story bathroom window is unlocked.] Mew noted.

"How are we going to-" I turned to Mew, who was already levitating Ethan through the window.

[In another life-] Mew frowned, trying to position Ethan's body correctly, [-I actually knew how to teleport objects through space, which would make this task so much simpler.]

At last Mew got it, and placed Ethan in his bedâ€|or so Mew said. I couldn't see for myself, so I chose to trust my new partner.

We stood outside taking in each other's presence for a moment in the

light of the rising moon. Mew's playful smirk was gone, replaced with a look of calm reverence.

[So, you are my trainer then?] Mew looked me up and down, judging me.

"Yes." I nodded assertively.

[â€|That means you have to feed me.] Mew giggled, poking me playfully with its tail.

"Yes." I laughed.

[I want a star fruit.] Mew stated.

"I don't think the shops have those."

[I want a lychee then.] Mew corrected.

"I, um, I don't know what that is. And I don't think they have that either."

[Mmmm.] Mew frowned. [What do the shops in this time have?]

"We have Sinnoh food?" I offered.

[Sinnoh.] Mew sighed contentedly. [It has been many lives since I've had the pleasure of Sinnoh cuisine. I miss the noodles.]

"Would you like some of those?"

[Yes. Yes I would.] Mew nodded, and we began making our way to the shops. How would I explain to the store keeper that I had captured a Mew?

\* \* \*

><p>"You must be hungry."<p>

"The second one's for a friend. He's a bit shy though." I smirked, looking down at the ring of ultra balls on my belt.

"Ah, I understand. Enjoy!"

"Thanks, have a nice night." I smiled to the cashier. The cool night air greeted me as I stepped out of the store.

[He?] My hat asked.

"I'm sorry?"

[You referenced me as a 'he' to the salesman.]

"Oh, I'm sorry. Would you prefer a different pronoun?"

[No. It's just interesting seeing your interpretation.] My hat giggled, melting off my head and transforming back into Mew.

"Soâ€|what are the limitations of your transformation ability?" I

asked, offering Mew his noodles. Mew smiled in acceptance, but didn't take the fork.

[I'm just as adaptable as a Ditto. I'm more imaginative, but it's hard to do things on the fly. Simple things â€" a key, a hat â€" those are easy.]

[What's hard, then?]

Mew gulped a mouthful of noodles. [Like, say for instance a meteorite was headed for earth, and I had to stop it. If I had to stop it \_now, \_I couldn't. I couldn't suddenly get super strength and push it aside, or have Mewtwo's power to just break it with telekinesis. I'm not that strong. BUT, if I had some time and Mewtwo was there, or Rayquaza, I could just transform into them, then do it.]

"Okay, I get that."

Mew stuck his head in the bowl of noodles, and slurped loudly. [I think this is humanities finest achievement. The perfect blend of salt and sweetness.]

"It's even better with a fork." I grinned, offering Mew the spare fork.

[Oh, contraire.] Mew laughed. [The plastic takes away from the dish, plus it forces you to pace yourself. Just plunge your face in; it's WAY better.]

"I'll take your word for it." I laughed, taking a slow bite of the Sinnoh cuisine. Mew smirked and handed me an empty bowl, face happily coated in soy sauce.

"Wait. So if have trouble transforming into pokemon you can't see, how did you transform into Darkrai?"

[Oh, that?] Mew asked. [I just saw him beforehand and used his form.]

[Can you still do it?]

[It was recentâ€¦I think so?] Mew concentrated, taking the form of a slightly off-color Darkrai, with blue eyes. [This isâ€¦close, right?]

"I think he's not completely black. Like, just a shade lighter."

Mew became a shade lighter.

[And I THINK he had red eyes, or at least, like, dark pink.]

Mew's eyes became red.

"Yeah. I think that was it."

Suddenly a Zorua flashed into existence in front of me, and tackled Mew. Mew spun around â€" still in Darkrai's form â€" and thrashed violently, trying to throw the Zorua off. A Charmeleon dashed in front of me, shielding me from impact. A Charizard landed clumsily behind Mew, roaring violently with streaks of fire blasting out of

her mouth. Static dashed up beside the Charmeleon, and a Wigglytuff hid behind me.

"What is going on!?"

The Charizard grappled Mew by the wisps of the Darkrai's arms, holding him immobile. Skarr flew down and sliced Mew badly across the chest, opening up a large purple gash. Static and Nova both attacked, sending a spray of fire and electricity pulsing into the wound Skarr had opened up.

[Arrrrgh!] Mew screamed.

"Everyone, stop!" I ordered.

Mew melted out of Charizard's grip, and reformed into his normal form. His eyes shone with white for a moment, before he released a blast of energy, sending everything soaring backwards. Charizard was flung into the air, and the others crashed and rolled on the ground.

I crashed against the pavement hard, on my shoulder. Colors swirled around me, but I forced myself to stand. Static stood by my side, fur bristled and at the ready. The others simply stared at Mew.

[Urk...] Mew grimaced, clutching his chest. I walked over calmly, attempting convey a sense of rationality in the mix of all of this chaos. I sprayed Mew with an antidote, and then gave him a potion. Mew nodded in thanks, and looked at the surrounding Pok mon that staring at him in awe.

[  Mew?] Skarr asked, in awe.

[It's an illusion!] Myst growled.

[No more an illusion then the grass at your feet, or the shade of a tall tree.] Mew smiled. Myst hesitantly pawed at Mew, poking him with a stubby black paw. Mew giggled.

[Mew  ] Myst retreated, eyes full of wonder. Charizard bowed, along with Skarr. Nova and Static stood at my side, confused, yet refusing to bow or yield their ground.

[Please. Your formalities are chivalrous, but misguided. I am your equal.] Mew shrugged, floating in the air.

[Aren't you  Darkrai?] Static asked, confused. Skarr groaned in the background.

[No, dear Pikachu. I am Mew, the nine hundred and seventieth rendition. I am eternal, and undying. I am the spark that has allowed life to exist upon this planet, and I am the Ancestor to all Pok mon on this earth.] Mew smiled happily.

[It's a legend, then?] Static turned to me, tugging on my jeans. [You caught a legend? That's so badass! How'd you do it? I wasn't even there!]

[Static  ] I groaned. I realized this was the first impression my team would get of Mew, and I winced.

[We have to name you!] Nova clapped happily, slightly oblivious to the magnitude of the situation.

[Name me?] Mew asked, amused.

[Yeah! Like, something that defines you!] Nova chirped. [Like, I was named afterâ€|the um, theâ€|theâ€|] Nova blinked, holding his head.

[The star thing! The big one!] Myst suggested helpfully.

[Ttthat one!] Nova slurred.

[Are you both alright?] I blinked. Nova and Myst were acting strangelyâ€|sick, perhaps?

[They're both drunk.] Skarr groaned.

[How are you two drunk!?] I asked, frustrated. Myst shrunk back meekly, while Nova looked confused.

[Drunk?] He asked, wobbling slightly.

[Perhaps introductions â€" and naming â€" would be better performed in the morning, when we all have a better sense of clarity.] Mew winked, and laughed his harmonious laugh.

It was late. The sun had long since set, and I could feel the weariness clutching at my eyelids. [Fair. Let's get back to the forest, and I'll put out best rolls for everyone. Myst and Nova?]

[Mmmm?] The duo looked at me with curiosity.

[I want you to drink half of this-] I held up a water bottle. [-before you go to sleep. You'll thank me in the morning.]

[Okay. Goodnight Josh!] Nova chirped.

[Goodnight, Nova.]

[Pleasant dreams.]

[Goodnight, Skarr.]

[Don't get eaten by Darkrai!]

[I'll try.] I laughed. [Goodnight, Static.]

[Sleep well.]

[You too, Charizard.] I nodded.

[â€|'Night.] Wigglytuff mumbled.

[Goodnight, Wigglytuff.]

[See you at dawnâ€|] Myst sleepily thought.

[You as well. Goodnight, Myst. See you all tomorrow.]

I crawled into my sleeping bag, mindful I had missed one important member of my team.

[Sleep well, Mew.] I smiled.

[Actually, I don't sleep.] Mew spoke with a trace of sadness. [The bliss of unconsciousness is only available to me in the space between lives. I will keep watch, and ensure Darkrai does not encroach on us at this hour.]

[Oh. Thank you.] I nodded. [Well, okay, good night.]

[That it is.] Mew smiled up at the stars. [And a good night to you as well, Josh, my trainer.]

\* \* \*

><p>I shivered to consciousnessâ€|and I was wet. Not a good sign. Reluctantly, I peeked out from behind my moist sleeping bag and stared at a dark grey sky. Rain fell on my head, mocking my already soaked, limp hair.<p>

"Aughâ€|" I groaned. Now \_everything \_would need to be washed. My eyes went wide as I dived for my phone â€" still in my pocket, and still relatively dry. My back was waterproofâ€|ish. Most things should be fine, but the sleeping bags would reek if they didn't get washed soon. No one else had woken up yet, save Mew, who hadn't been sleeping.

[Good morning, Josh.] A melodious voice echoed within my mind.

[Hardly.] I grimaced, wiping the sleep from my eye.

[Oh?]

[I'm soaked, head to toe.] I scowled, still relatively sleep deprived.

[Soaked in what?]

[Water! What else?]

[Water. Defined as a chemical compound which contains one oxygen molecule and two hydrogen atoms connected by covalent bonds. It is also the only known substance to start and sustain life in the universe. How wondrous it simply falls from the sky for us, is it not?]

I took pause. [Iâ€|I didn't see it that way.]

[Few do.] Mew smiled sadly. [Rain is such a gift, and people treat it as an inconvenience. When people forget the gift of rain, how long until other gifts become a nuisance, or merely forgotten? The warm sun on an autumn day, or the air, freely given for us to breathe?]

I bowed, ashamed.

Mew laughed another musical laugh. [Do not be abashed, dear Josh. I am not telling you how to live, such would be a pox on the greatest of life's gifts: the will to choose your own perception. I just wanted to share my vision-]

[Oh son of a \_bitch!\_] Static shouted, crawling out of his soaked sleeping bag. [When did it start \_raining!?!\_]

[â€|well, one soul at a time.] Mew deadpanned, grinning slyly.

I checked the time: nine in the morning. I wanted to fight Blane today at the fire gym, but I doubt Skarr could fly in this storm. We were also some ways away from a centerâ€|

Carefully, I got out my phone.

[Who're you calling?] Static asked, violently shaking his fur free of water.

[Sandy. Just to ask if we can wait out the storm at her place.]

I reasoned I could bike to Vermillion fairly shortly and camp at Sandy's house. Probably wash and dry the bed rolls and maybe a few of my clothes as well.

[Alright, I'm just going to put everyone in their pokeballs until we get there, her agreement pending.] I announced.

[Just get me out of the storm.] Static groaned. With a flash of red, he got his wish. Nova, Skarr, and the rest were still sound asleep, so getting them in their pokeballs was simple, save Charizard. I reasoned Sandy wouldn't be \_too \_mad at me for capturing a PokÃ©mon she already ownedâ€|I would give it right back, of course. With a frown I tossed an ultraball, and caught the Chairzard unaware. Good.

I turned to Mew.

[So, um.] I looked at the PokÃ©balls on my belt. Mew stared back at me curiously. [Which one would you like?]

[Which what?]

[Um, pokeball.]

Mew giggled. [You plan to capture me?]

[Iâ€|.wouldn't call it 'capture'.] I reasoned. [Just, you know, keep you out of the rain.]

[What will you do about the Masterball?] Mew asked, suddenly serious.

[If you're planning on staying with me, I'll either give it to you or break it.] I answered.

[So I am a bargaining chip to you? You would risk the Treaty of Concord and the lives of billions on a mere trinket?]

[No!] I yelped. [J-just, I need you around for Darkrai, so he doesn't

kill me! I-I'm not trying to keep you here under force-] Mew laughed, interrupting me. [Oh. You weren't serious, were you?]

[You are easy to upset.] Mew noted, giggling.

[Thanks.] I growled.

[May I choose to adopt the form of your hat once more?] Mew asked. [Iâ€|dislike the concept of being confined.]

[Okay, that's fine. It's common for PokÃ©mon to dislike PokÃ©balls.] I smiled. Mew grinned and floated above my head, transforming into a thick red cap.

[Alright, calling Sandyâ€|] I muttered mentally. I dialed her number, wiped off the rainwater from my ear with my shoulder, and pressed the phone to my cheek.

Ring.

Ring.

Ringâ€|

"Hey! This Alessandra! If you're a fan, please stop leaving messages personal cell phone! If you're anyone else, sorry I don't have my phone on me â€" it's probably inside a couch cushion, or I put it in the refrigerator again! Anyway, leave a message after the beep!"

A long beep went off.

"Hey Sandy!" I chirped. "Um, it's raining here pretty hard and everything's \_soaked, \_and I was wondering if we could all go to your cabin to dry off and kind of sort everything-"

I heard the sound of a phone being picked up.

"W-who is this!?" Sandy picked up her phone. She sounded \_terrible, \_like she had been crying. Her throat was ragged, and her voice cracked as she spoke.

"Me? Josh?" I asked. "Why Sandy? What's wrong?"

"P-prove it's you." She ordered, choking back a sob.

"Um, sure, okay."

\_What happened? What's wrong with her?\_

"You, umâ€|" I racked my mind, trying to find a fitting memory. "You shoved a shrimp up my nose when I tried to kiss you at that seafood-"

"Ohmygod, Josh!" Sandy cried into the phone.

"Sandy, what's wrong?"

"The news said you \_died.\_"

I blinked. "What?"



"Darkrai! He appeared in a theater, and killed two young adults! I knew you were there, and someone said they identified one of them with red hair and g-green eyesâ€|I was so scaredâ€|"

\_Oh.\_

"No, it was all a misunderstanding. I was able to talk-"

"Wait, it \_WAS \_you!?"

"Um, well, yes, but it's a long story-"

"Josh." Sandy deadpanned into the phone. "I just spent all night crying into my pillow and pouring my \_soul \_out to Wigglytuff because I thought my boyfriend â€" whom by the way I \_just \_confessed my love to â€" was dead, at the hands of Darkrai. Believe me, I have time for whatever story you're going to tell."

I winced. I wanted to tell her everything, but my phone was beginning to glisten with rainwater. Of all the technological advances we humans had invented over the years, waterproof phones was \_not\_one of them.

"Listen!" I asked. "I'll tell you everything, in detail, later on. Right now though I'm in the middle of a storm-"

A loud crack of thunder incinerated a tree across the clearing, as if to emphasize my point.

"-and I need to find a place to wait it out, and wash the bed rolls!"

"You can just use my cabin." Sandy suggested helpfully.

"Okay, yeah, that's what I was going to ask. Okay, thanks!"

"I expect a story later though! A good one! You made me cry, like, \_ugly \_cry for hours!"

"I will!" I promised.

"Alright, love you!"

\_Love you.\_

I blushed. It sounded so normal, even if it was only the second time her lips had ever echoed the phrase. I yearned for a time where that saying would become commonplace, but I vowed to never take it for granted. The air warmed around me, and suddenly the rain didn't seem so cold.

"Love you too." I smiled, and hung up the phone.

\* \* \*

><p>I shivered, taking off my drenched clothes and placing them in the washer. I <em>almost <em>put Mew in my accident before I realized my mistake. Mew giggled.

[Would that be considered abuse, putting you in the washer?] I laughed, glad I had chosen to only take my shirt off by this point.

[Well, it would wash me, and I have no nerve endings to feel pain.] Mew reasoned.

[Give me a second to get changed, alright?] I asked, placing my cap outside the room on a dresser.

I stripped and placed my clothes in the washer. I was cold. My bare skin glistened with rainwater as I held my arms to my chest, shivering. I never thought to pack a towel, and I just hoped the dry clothes I was about to put on would \_stay\_dry. Grimacing, I put on a new pair of jeans and a black t-shirt. I felt even colder without my jacket, but it needed to be washed, along with the bedrolls.

[Soâ€|you're wet too, right?] I asked my hat after stepping outside the room.

[Correct.]

[Do youâ€|want to be rung?]

A chime of laughter entered my consciousness. [If you would be so kind.]

\_Well. This is strange.\_

I grabbed one of the most powerful Ancient PokÃ©mon known to man, and wrung it over a small turquoise bathtub.

[This is so weird.] I laughed, wringing the last of the water out of the cap.

[Why?] Mew pondered, taking its natural form.

[I've never talked to inanimate objects before.] I chuckled.

[\_Never?\_] Mew asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

[Well, I mean, I suppose I have, but I never expected a response.]

Mew nodded, content at that answer. [We don't have a word in our language for 'inanimate'. Even rocks and dirt have history; lives that span eons. Nothing is without cause or importance.]

[I didn't say without importance, I just meant, like, things that were inorganic.]

[I was not inorganic. The hat was made from wool, which was from a Mareep.]

Argh, technicalities. [You know what I-]

"Josh!" A woman's voice exclaimed from the doorway. I turned to be tackled by a brown blur, and received a mouthful of curly auburn

hair.

"Sandy!" I exclaimed happily, attempting to both hug her and remove the hair in my mouth.

"Alright, tell me every-" She turned and saw Mew, hovering in the corner. Mew waved to her with a stubby paw, and tilted his head curiously.

"Mew, meet Sandy." I smiled awkwardly. "Sandyâ€¦meet Mew, or pseudo-Darkrai, as you saw on T.V."

Sandy just stared in awe for a moment. Mew giggled, and blinked with his bright eyes.

"You're beautiful." Sandy commented slowly.

[Thank you.] Mew smiled graciously.

"Did you capture her?" Sandy turned to me.

[Her.] Mew giggled again, like a calming melody.

"Oh! I'm sorry! A-are you male?" Sandy fumbled.

[I am creation.] Mew shrugged. Sandy shot me a confused, embarrassed look.

"Here, let's start from the beginning, alright?" I suggested to Mew. "That way Sandy's all caught up."

[Very well. I was a mere idea back then, sparked into life inside the nothingness of the cosmos by Arceus, creator of-]

"I-I meant, the beginning of the play."

[I know what you meant.] Mew grinned. [I was only \_Joshing \_you.]

I took a moment to digest the pun, then groaned.

[Wellâ€¦Mew'll fit right in.] Sandy smirked. She crossed her arms with a quiet smile and leaned against the wall, waiting patiently for us to tell our tale.

\* \* \*

><p>[I say we kill him.]<p>

[You can't just kill me!]

[You're bit. Anyone bit turns into a zombie. Everyone knows that.]

[B-but it could be different for me!]

[Static, you're being cruel.]

[Oh, \_I'm \_the cruel one!? You didn't have any problem killing those humans for food back there!]

[I-I had no choice! They had guns on usâ€¦it was us or them!] Skarr choked.

[Like it is now.] Static spat. [I take the hatchet, and move towards Nova.]

[Nova? Would you like to take an action?] I asked.

[Iâ€¦I don't know. I try to shrink back and look helpless, I guess.] He shook, terrified.

[What do you do, Mew?] I asked.

[Iâ€¦I don't know!] Mew blinked, terrified. [My options are so limited! He can't live because he'll suffer and turn, but it is unethical to kill him! Both options are inexcusable!]

I grinned behind my Game Master's screen. I had no idea Sandy kept a copy of a zombie pen and paper roleplaying game, but when she suggested we play it while waiting out the storm I didn't object. Everyone was really into it, especially Nova and Static. Poor Nova got attacked during the third encounter, and the group was now facing one of the hardest choices yet.

[I attack him.] Static said quietly.

[With?]

[The hatchet.]

[Like hell you will!] Myst bristled.

[Roll the D20.]

Static tossed the dice. It bounced across the table, displaying a mediocre twelve. Nova looked terrified.

[That misses. Nova, you were barely able to dodge out of the way.]

[O-okay.] Nova shook. I wondered if this might have been a bit violent for him, but he also seemed to be enjoying himself.

[I'll attempt to grapple Static and force the axe out of his hands.] Sandy claimed.

[I assist her!] Myst asserted.

[Roll for it.]

[Nineteen.] Sandy answered.

[Okay. You're able to pry away the axe from Static. Now what?]

[Wait! I, um, I wish to examine Nova's wound further!] Mew asked, excitedly.

[Very well. What is your character's medical experience?]

[Pâ€|poor.] Mew frowned.

[Roll.]

Mew looked at the dice, and it jumped and spun in the air, displaying an eight.

[It looks like a bite, but you can't be sure.] I described. [It's definitely shaped like one, but it looks very \_perfect \_for a bite, more resembling a knife then a wound from a jaw.]

\_Probably too much description for a roll of an eight, but hey, I want Nova to live and have a good time playing.\_

[So it's possible he \_wasn't \_bitten?] Mew clarified. I shrugged and smiled. Mew scowled.

[If there's even a \_chance \_he wasn't bitten we can't kill him. It's wrong.] Myst ordered, placing her figuring between Nova and Static.

[We can't afford to take chances anymore!] Static growled, smashing his paw on the table in emphasis. [That's what killed Wigglytuff!]

Wigglytuff sat on one end of the table, noisily munching on a plate of cookies. [I am coming back, right?] She asked, her mouth full of crumbs.

[Yeah, but you'll have to play someone new.]

[Okay. I can wait.] She placed another cookie in her mouth, even though I could see she hadn't finished chewing the last one.

[â€|Anyway!] Static asserted. [It's them or us! And I choose us. Move out of the way, Myst. You know what has to be done.]

[I won't let you kill him!] Myst snarled.

[Neither will I.] Sandy placed her figuring around Static's.

[You'll have to kill me, then.] Static said in a low monotone.

[S-stop! There has to be a better alternative!] Mew choked.

[I-I'll leave the group! Please, just don't hurt each other!] Nova whimpered.

Skarr turned away from the table.

[You can't be on the fence about this, Skarr!]

[I..I can'tâ€|] Skarr stuttered.

[This is where we make a stand!]

[We can't kill our \_allies!\_] Skarr begged.

[They're not our allies anymore.] Static ground his teeth.

I smiled. We might not fight the gym today, but we would be together, having fun. In the end, what was more important?

\* \* \*

><p>"This is nice."<p>

"Mmmm?" Sandy turned to me with half closed, deep auburn eyes. Outside, the storm was just coming to an end.

"Just this." I motioned to us, beneath the covers, talking and enjoying each other's warmth. Sandy gave me a sleepy smile. "Tomorrow, Blaine. Then I'll have seven badges. Seven out of eight."

"You should see your parents first."

I frowned. "I will. Just not \_tomorrow.\_ It can wait until-"

"Josh, they probably think you're dead." Sandy said. "The news, remember? Not only have you not gone to the news, you haven't told your \_parents. \_They're probably mourning you right now."

\_Oh. Huh.\_

I nodded reluctantly. "â€|Alright. Tomorrow, then."

"Good." Sandy smiled at me, content with my decision. She rolled over and shut off the lamp, shutting off all but the moonlight that shone from the window. Something warm and soft pressed against my cheek. "Goodnight, Josh."

"Goodnight, Sandy." I wrapped an arm around her side, and curled next to her.

### 23. Half-Screwed

Skarr had been quiet on the flight over to Celadon. Truthfully I didn't want to go back either, but I thought I would find respite in my friend, in the very least. Perhaps he had woken up on the wrong side of the pillow, or perhaps something else was amiss.

I made a note to check on it later, once the issue with my parents was resolved. Skarr landed gracefully outside my parents' house, barely making a rustle in the soft grass beneath his wings. Charizard wasn't so graceful however, and barely avoided crashing in my parents garden.

[Apologies.] Charizard said, pushing herself up and extending a paw to assist Sandy. Sandy gave a tired smirk and accepted it, then returned Charizard to her PokÃ©ball. I did the same with Skarr.

[Thanks for coming with me.] I said, holding Sandy's hand in my own.

[I knew this wouldn't be easy.] Sandy hugged me lightly, and then nodded to the door. With lead in my boots, I walked forward and pressed the doorbell. The house was dark, and the doorbell was faint.

"Maybe they're not home." I suggested, turning to Sandy with a guilty, hopeful gaze.

"Let's stay to find out."

Grudgingly, I waited at the door. After a few moments I heard some shuffling, and someone unlocked the door. I saw my mother open the door with bloodshot eyes, still in her bathrobe.

"J-Josh?" My mother shook, only holding the door half open. She looked terrified and doubtful, as if I was some kind of aberration.

"H-hey mom." I said, holding out my arms in an attempt for a hug. She flung the door open and tackled me, crushing my sides.

"They said you \_DIED, \_Josh!" She sobbed, squeezing the life out of me. I returned her embrace, if not as fiercely. After a few moments she released me, wiping the tears from her eyes. "O-oh, I'm sorry! W-who is this young lady?"

"Hello Mrs. Karren." Sandy gave a small curtsy. "Just here for moral support."

"Are you two together?" My mother smiled a knowing grin.

I nodded happily. "For six months now?" I turned to Sandy. She shrugged, and gave me a helpless expression.

"Oh, give me a moment. I need to tell Keith you're still alive!" My mom said. Sandy winced, as if she smelled something distasteful. My mom invited us inside, and walked to the stairs.

"Are you okay?" I asked Sandy. She looked like she was going to be sick.

"Keith." Sandy shook her head. "I just don't like the name, that's all."

"Why?"

"That was my father's name, before he...left." Sandy frowned.

"I'm sorry." I held her hand gingerly.

"Don't be."

My mother came back down the stairs, holding my father in tow. "Look! It's Josh, Keith! It's Josh!"

"Hey, Dad!" I looked at my father, but he stared straight through me

"Allesandra?" My father's hollow, deep voice echoed through the room. I turned to Sandy to see her staring back at him, her face a pale

white.

"Hey, dadâ€|" Sandy choked.

\* \* \*

><p>I smashed another glass back on the table, grimacing as the burning liquid tore at my throat.<p>

"Another one, whenever you have a moment." I motioned at the bartender.

"Kid, you just got here." The barkeep frowned, pouring me another shot. "It's two in the afternoon."

"It's two in the afternoon, and I need to get drunk very badly."

He shrugged, and slid another shot my way. I nodded wearily in thanks.

[So, what happened?] Static asked, nursing an apple martini in his paw. I know he could feel my pain leaking into his consciousness through the Pokespeak.

[I'd say I didn't want to talk about it, but you know better.] I frowned, taking another shot.

[So? Then talk.]

[Sandy and I are related.]

[Huh?] Static sat for a few moments, putting the pieces together. [But, wait. Ew. You two are dating!]

[Yeahâ€|]

[You're dating yourâ€|sister?]

[\_Half\_-sister.] I stared into my empty shot glass, my thoughts already beginning to blur.

[What are you going to do?]

I motioned to the bartender again, and he slid over another shot. [Honestly Staticâ€|]

"Room for a third?" Someone asked behind me. I turned to see Sandy, wearing a ragged top and tattered jeans. She grinned warily with bloodshot eyes, and took my shot for herself.

[Sure.] I shrugged. It was wrong, but I enjoyed her company. I made room beside myself, and she sat down.

The three of us sat in silence for a long time. Thoughts buzzed in my head, not yet silenced by the alcohol in my blood. What was I going to do?

[Word will get around.] Sandy mentioned hollowly. [You're two badges away from becoming the most famous trainer in Kanto. Hell, I'm already a Brain. We can't keep this up without the public getting



windâ€|]

[Not to mention the moral ramifications of dating your half-sibling.]  
I groaned, putting my head against the cool, wooden bar.

[Do you still love me?]

I lifted my head enough to meet Sandy's eye. Though her gaze was unsteady, it never broke from my own.

[Yeah, I love you.] I nodded, exhaling a large breath.

"Though the darkness, though the pain?" The words she spoke were audible, even though she never moved her mouth. The world swirled around me slowly, sickeningly. Where had I heard that phrase before?

"To Hell, and back again." I answered, my lips echoing the phrase that my mind hadn't fully pieced together. I leaned against the counter, clutching it with an enormous fist. I blinked and looked back at it â€" my hand was easily the size of a basketball, with seven fingers and no thumb. The world slurred around me. Static was missing, and the bar was empty.

"Sandy?" I called out, and the name echoed back to me. Empty bottles lay scattered around me, and the strong smell of alcohol filled the air. Behind me, someone entered the bar.

I turned to see an Absol. It stared back at me with judgment.

"Use the Masterball." It spoke with perfect clarity.

"â€|What?" My mind was fogged, and his words made no sense.

"Use the Masterball."

I still couldn't understand him. "What?"

"Josh!" Sandy's voice screamed from inside the Absol. "USE THE MASTERBALL!"

\* \* \*

><p>I jolted awake, tasting blood. I was in a clearing somewhere. Static stood in front of me, guarding me with a fierce stream of electricity. Mew levitated a few feet away, a terrible gash torn through his bright pink fur.<p>

[I know you won't stay dead, but it will be \_so \_pleasurable being able to say I finally killed you, you perversion.] A haunting voice filled my mind.

[Hah! You're nothing more than fear, Darkrai. Kill me once, and you will have accomplished nothing! I will be reborn, but when you die you will rot in Giratina's hells forever!] Mew spat.

Mew and Darkrai eyed each other with venom in the center of the clearing. Trees and small shrubs were blown backwards due to a fight unseen. Darkrai had not a scratch, but Mew looked exhausted and sickened.

I sat up, pushing myself off the charred grass. Sandy screamed something to me, but her voice was lost as an explosion blew us back. Mew held Darkrai back with some kind of force, but Darkrai was resisting with his own black energy.

[In another life, I would have liked to spare you.] Darkrai spoke to Mew, his chilling voice overwhelming me with fear. [Keep you as my \_pet. \_Do you do tricks? Here, let's try â€" speak!]

Darkrai let out a blast of blackness, breaking Mew's shield and blasting through him.

"AHH!" Mew screamed, clutching his chest and falling to the ground.

[Nothing more than fear, you say?] Darkrai hovered over to Mew threatening. [Fear is enough. Fear is infinite, and crippling. Fear is death.]

[Fear can be contained.] I smashed my Masterball into Darkrai's back. He whirled around as he became engulfed in scarlet, and screamed as his essence was taken into the orb. The Masterball shook in my hand as Darkrai's spirit smashed against the sides, unwilling to be captured. It didn't matter; he had no choice.

[Is everyone okay?] I choked out, pocketing the shaking Masterball. Mew groaned from the clearing, bleeding into the charred grass. I raced over, and quickly gave him a potion.

[Tâ€|thank youâ€|] Mew blinked, as if seeing me for the first time.

[Is everyone else alright?] I looked around. Static looked rough, but nothing potion wouldn't heal.

Sandy looked alright, if a bit terrified. [I-I'm okay. Thanks.]

[For what?] I laughed nervously, the familiar feeling of shock and nausea coming over me.

[Umâ€|saving my life?] Sandy smirked in her usual coy way.

[When did I-]

[He wouldn't remember. His memory has been altered.] Mew announced. [Luckily he woke up when he did, but unfortunately his memory of the battle has been destroyed.]

[Huh?] Static and I both gulped.

[You don't remember saving me?] Sandy frowned.

A sense of vertigo suddenly came over me. [N-no, I don'tâ€|what did Iâ€|?]

Something caught me. It was warm and pleasant, but I didn't know what it was.

[Sleep, Josh. Sleep, and your dreams will be unperturbed for now.]

\* \* \*

><p>[Soâ€|in your nightmare we were <em>related?<em>]

[Yeah. It was weirdâ€|] I rubbed my eyes and yawned. Sandy, Mew, and Static all stood around me, listening to my odd tale.

[You know I'm black, right?] Sandy smirked.

[What? You \_are?\_] I turned to Sandy with mock surprise. [W-what!? Why didn't you tell me? How could you keep this from me all this time!?!]

She snorted a laugh. [I'm just saying it doesn't make sense.]

[Dreams have no limitations that the physical world may possess.] Mew pointed out.

[I know, but still.]

I turned to Sandy. [So, apparently I saved your life?]

[Yup. Pretty badass, except for the part where you fell asleep and got your memories erased.]

[So what exactly \_happened\_?]

[Let me tell it! Let me tell it!] Static hopped up and down.

Sandy shrugged. [Go right ahead.]

[Okay! I had \_just \_fallen asleep with Mew hovering over me, 'cause, you know, she-he-it-whatever doesn't sleep.]

[I prefer he.] Mew reiterated.

[Yeah, but you're a girl so you're weird.] Static waved him off. [Anyway, Mew shouted something and I sprang awake JUST as I saw this dark blob rush into the house. I ran into the living room to see Mew and Darkrai just \_smashing \_the living room and sending bolts of power soaring through the walls and tables!] Static raced around the room, mimicking the apparently amazing battle that I had forgotten. [It was so \_loud. \_You and Sandy raced down the stairs, and Darkrai turned to you to kill you, but Mew struck him from behind. In a fit of confusion he shot at you but \_missed, \_and shot instead at Sandy. You dove in front of it-]

[Niiiiice.] I nodded, satisfied I was still alive.

[-and got blasted into a wall, and fell unconscious.]

[The move was Dark Void, if you were curious.] Mew explained. [Normally it just puts something to sleep and gives them nightmares, but due to the force behind the attack \_and \_the fact you're both human and mortal, it hit you a bit harder than normal.]

[Wait.] I blinked. [But I woke up \_outside. \_How did we all get outside?]

Sandy sighed. [Remember how we were upstairs in my room, and how my house is two stories?]

[Yeah?]

[We had an unscheduled demolition. My house is now one story.]

I took a moment to process the information, then looked out the window. Sure enough, we were on the ground floor despite being in the 'upstairs' section of the house. [Shit. Darkrai \_broke \_your house?]

[He didn't act alone, I'm afraid.] Mew swallowed guiltily. [Though I acted in the interest of saving lives, technically most of the damage was caused at my hands.]

[Shit. Um, how are we going to pay-]

[I have insurance.] Sandy waved me off. [I'llâ€|wow. I have no \_idea \_what I'll tell them. But don't worry about it.]

[Okayâ€|and I still have Darkrai.] I looked over at the Masterball sitting on the dresser. It was dangerously still.

[\_You \_have Darkrai?] Mew turned to me with a fierce gaze. [I recall you promising to destroy the Masterball, per my agreement to serve you.]

[I meant, he's still a problem!] I blurted out. [I don't mean I own him or that the Masterball won't be broken, I just mean that he is still an issue that needs to be resolved!]

[And how do you plan to go about 'resolving' him, then?] Mew asked, with a headily venom in his eyes. I rolled out of bed, grabbed the Masterball, and offered it to Mew.

[You can have it, or you can give it to another one of the Ancients â€" maybe Mewtwo. Someone that will take care of Darkrai, and make sure he doesn't get out of hand.]

Mew squinted in thought.

[What are you thinking of?]

[Well. You have proved yourself so farâ€|] Mew's tail began flicking back and forth, and he followed it with a playful gaze. [â€|how about you hold on to it while I regain my old power. Once I recall how to teleport, I will go back to the Temple of the Ancients and give the ball to Mewtwo.]

[That's fine.]

[Excellent!] Mew pounced triumphantly on his tail.

[Alright, that's settled.] I nodded. [Okay, who's up for fighting Blaine?]

[Yeah!] Static cheered.

[Nope. You promised me you would talk to your parents, remember?]  
Sandy nagged.

[But I already did!] I pointed out. [It didn't go so well.]

[When?]

[In my dream, remember?] I grinned.

[For \_real.\_] Sandy emphasized her statement with a poke to my chest.

[Alright, fine, fine.]

[And we should go now. You've been asleep for a little over a day, andâ€¦|wellâ€¦|]

[What?]

[Your parents are holding your funeral today.]

I let out a long breath. [Oh. Oh, wow.]

[Duuuude!] Static jumped in the air excitedly.

[Static, this is bad. Really bad.] I frowned.

[Dude! You can crash your own \_funeral!\_] Static yelped. [Swagger all up to the pew and be all badass!]

[Actually that does sound pretty coolâ€¦|] I grinned. Sandy gave me a disapproving look, which I ignored. [Hey Mew?]

[Mmmm?] Mew turned to me, biting the end of his tail.

[If you transformed into my hat could you still levitate?]

[Yes?]

[Could you levitate yourself and the person wearing you?]

[Yes.]

[What if the person fell from a significant height? Sayâ€¦|thirty to fifty feet? If the person was wearing you, could you bring them slowly to a stop without hurting them?]

[Easily.]

[Josh, no.] Sandy ordered. I grinned back at her. [Josh, your parents are going to be beside themselves with grief. Are you really thinking of doing this?]

[I'm already going to be alive. Why not make an entrance \_everyone \_will remember?] I smirked. Sandy sighed, rubbing her forehead with her palm.

\* \* \*

><p>[So you lied?]<p>

[It's not \_lying,\_ exactly.]

[What is it then? Procrastination?]

[Bending the truth. Just a little.] I smirked guiltily as Skarr and I landed at the small island of Cinnabar. [Plus, I \_am \_going to go talk to my parents. Just, you know. The service doesn't start until five anyway; why inconvenience so many people?]

[There are days where I question your logic.] Skarr deadpanned behind me. The Cinnabar gym looked a bit decrepit â€" rust covered a section of the entrance, and cracks were appearing in the once great pillars.

In a flash of red, all my allies appeared before me. All of them looked towards the gym, save Nova who looked around questioning the change in scenery.

[Where's Sandy?] Nova asked.

[She'll be meeting us at the Cave later, gym badges pending.] I answered.

[Okay, cool.]

[So? Let's go and battle!] Static hopped up the crooked stairs leading up to the gym.

[Aren't we forgetting something?] Myst scowled. Static turned back, and shot her a confused look. [Weren't we supposed to go to your funeral?]

[Yeah, later. It's at five, so-]

[-so we can get there \_before \_all the guests? All the people that think you're murdered?]

[We still have time.]

[Joshâ€¦] Myst frowned.

[What?]

Myst gave me a disappointed frown. I waved her off, and continued up the stairs, followed by my small hoard of PokÃ©mon. Begrudgingly, Myst transformed me once more into Nightshade.

[Would you like a hat?] Mew asked me politely.

[I would prefer a watchâ€¦|can you do that?]

Mew laughed. [Sure. Let's try that.]

It wasn't perfect, and it moved backwards in time, but it would do. Like everything Nightshade wore, it quickly turned pitch black. I nodded, and walked in the gym.

\* \* \*

><p>Inside the gym, an elaborate maze was constructed out of trenches of some strong smelling liquid. Kerosene?<p>

It would have been an amazing if dangerous trial, had the trenches actually been lit on fire. I could just imagine the walls of flame of the maze, and the dizzying heat and frustration of making your way to Blaine. Unfortunately, they weren't lit. Without the flame's obscuring walls, the maze was simple to traverse.

[Soâ€|this is anticlimactic.] Nova frowned.

[Anti-what?] Static looked over.

[I mean, like, nothing's happening! All the lights are off.]

[Careful with your tail, Nova.] Myst pointed out, once Nova's tail got a bit too close to the yellowish liquid.

[Oh! Thanks.] Nova grabbed his tail, and held the flame carefully. [Though I don't think it would've lit anyway.]

[Just in case.]

The end of the maze was in sight. I could see a lone trainer at the back, laying on some kind of slab.

"Hello?" I called out, before remembering my guise as Nightshade. I cleared my throat. "\*\*\*\_Has this place already been claimed by the shadows?\_\*\*\*"

The figure sprung out of the slab, smashing against a pressure plate on the floor and igniting two massive torches to her sides. She held two batons, both with a strange black tip on both ends.

"Greetings, Shadow-Walker." She purred, twirling one of the batons dangerously close to the open flame. "You've kept me waiting awhile, you know."

"\*\*\*\_I've been expected?\_\*\*\*"

"Oh yes. Don't you know never to keep a girl waiting?" The woman stepped forward with a coy smirk on her face. She wore a dark grey leotard, which clashed against her pale white skin. She had short black hair, which curled quickly above her shoulders as if burned by fire.

"\*\*\*\_Who are you?\_\*\*\*"

"I am Enya, daughter of Blaine, Temptress of Fate, and The One That Dances With Fire!" She swirled around, catching one of her baton ends ablaze. In an impressive display, she lit all four ends of the batons on fire and swirled them around herself at extraordinary speeds. More than once, I could've sworn she touched herself with the fire, but each time she appeared unaffected. "I presume you are Nightshade, of course. Darkrai's Avatar, and Master of Darkness?" She lifted the baton to her lips and licked one of the ends, extinguishing

it.

\*\*\*\_Darkrai and I had a disagreement. I work alone.\*\*\*

"Do tell." Enya supported herself on a baton, and leaned forward promiscuously.

\*\*\*\_I would prefer to keep such actions confidential.\*\*\*

"A shadow creature like yourself would enjoy keeping secrets" Enya shrugged. She took a swig of something on her belt, then held the flaming end of one of the batons to her lips. A burst of flame resulted, existing at the edge of her scarlet lips. "Working by yourself must make you lonely. Even darkness has more than itself to keep it company."

\*\*\*\_Darkness needs no company but itself.\*\*\*

"Oh, contraire." Enya smirked, strutting towards me, batons blazing. "Darkness needs light, does it not? How else are shadows meant to flicker in excitement, or dance across the walls? You need light " you need fire." By now, she was almost touching me she was standing so close. She held the batons behind her, and leaned forward with lustful eyes. "The shadow can't exist without the light. So, why have you come, Nightshade? To battle, or to have a reminder of what it means to exist amongst us mortals?"

I saw where this was going. To my horror, I realized what she was lying on before was a \_bed. \_"\*\*\*\_I have only come to battle. I am above such actions, now.\*\*\*"

"Ah, too strong willed to be taken by the fires of passion; too proud to be taken by the temptations of the flesh?" In a slow motion, she slid the baton down her hand, licking the side lightly. I gave a quick thanks that my illusion kept my blush invisible. "Now, come. No god is infallible. If you are to fall for a mortal, what more poetic way then for it to be your opposite? Your downfall; the one thing darkness can never resist? Even night eventually kneels to the day" She placed her hand possessively upon my chest.

I quickly took a step back. "\*\*\*\_I-I am no god, nor do I have any inclination to fffffffornicate" I gulped, "\*\*\*\_with the mortals of this plane, as tempting as they may be.\*\*\*"

She gave a rich laugh. "Oh, Nightshade, I am no mere mortal. Send out your Pokémon, and I'll show you how deep the fire runs in my veins!" She dipped a burning end into the yellow rivers at our feet, igniting the liquid. The flame jumped up, creating walls around me, and an arena bathed in flames. The heat overwhelmed me immediately, and I staggered backwards. "Don't tell me you can't stand it, Shadow. A bit of heat won't hurt you"

\*\*\*\_H-how can we battle in these conditions!? My shadows can't withstand this heat!\*\*\*" I winced, covering my eyes.

"Oh? Do you submit to me then, Nightshade?" Enya stood forcefully in the middle of the arena, absorbing the fire's heat from all sides.

[I can handle it.] Nova thought quietly, still invisible due to



Myst's illusion. [I can fight.]

[If something happens, I have \_no \_backup plan. No one else can withstand these flames!] I ground my teeth. [At least not for longâ€¦]

[Do you think I can, Josh?]

"Don't keep a girl waitingâ€¦" Enya purred.

[I know you can, Nova.] Myst though quietly.

[Yeah. You can do this.] I agreed. "\*\*\_You think you can best me, Dancer of Fire? Darkness has always existed, before fire, before light. Go, StarVoid! End this misguided mortal's fantasies.\_\*\*"

"Go, Gasoline!" Enya snarled, sending out a fierce looking Flareon. "Do what you do best. Burn. Burn it all."

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

"Ready for this, you overgrown lizard?" Gasoline hissed.

I felt my multicolored claws grow out of my paws as I walked towards the center of the battlefield. Towers of flame flickered around me, roasting my orange fur.

[Dragon Claw.] Josh ordered, but I was already a step ahead. I raced forward, a chromatic trail of light flying behind my claws. Flareon tensed to jump, and I caught her in midair, smashing her downward in a blast of power.

"Auuugh!" She screamed, crashing on her side before springing back up. She gasped a huge breath and tensed, blasting the room in a wave of heat. I shielded my face, but felt the fire burn the ground I walked on, and char my flesh.

After a moment the flames subsided, and I again raced to finish her off. My claws clattered off a green shield she made at the last possible second. I growled and swiped again, but my fist met a torrent of fire. I dived out of the way before my arm could become completely singed.

Gasoline stood towards the corner of the room, with a coy smirk on her face. "Can't handle the heat, worm?"

"\*\*\_I'll rend you in twine!\_\*\*" I shouted, mustering all the venom I could. She bolted forward in a blast of energy, and I countered with a swipe of my draconic claws. I was too slow to overpower her, but I was able to redirect her attack. Her momentary disorientation was all it took for me to drive my claws across her sides, knocking her unconscious.

[Who's next!?] I growled, adrenalin pumping in my veins.

[You've taken too much damage. We \_need \_you if things go south.] Josh thought. [Static, can you get in there? You won't be in for long; I just need to heal Nova.]

[Do what you need to.] Static nodded.

"Go, Volkerosene!" Eyna cried, sending a tall Typhlosion in next to me.

[I need it. And I need you. Get out there.]

[Yes sir.] And Static took my place in the flames.

\* \* \*

><p>(Static POV)<p>

The heat was unbearable. I wasn't standing \_in \_the fire, but I was so close I could feel it. It was worse than a sandstorm; I could feel myself being cooked.

"How's it feel being well done?" Volkerosene cackled, cracking his fingers menacingly. "Careful, you might get burned here, runt."

Electricity crackled around me, and I smirked despite my charred fur. "Bring the fire, bitch."

[Static! Fake out, then thunderbolt! I'll try to heal Nova while he's distracted by the blows.]

[Got it.] I thought. The Typhlosion stood cockily on the other side of the room, obviously listening to orders as well.

After a moment, he fell on all fours. "Last chance to run."

"Not in your dreams."

His mane burst into flame, and he leaned back grabbing a heated breath. I was already on him, paws crunched together. He flinched back growling, but he was far too slow. My foot crunched against his muzzle, crackling with the electricity from my cheeks. It smacked his jaw up, and he staggered backwards. I rushed in with another blow, but he caught me with a fist and brought me right up to his face.

"My turn." He snarled. With the other hand he smashed me across the face, sending me sprawling to the floor. I struggled up, but a wave of fire flew across the field, sending me back to the ground.

"Arggggh." I pushed myself off the ground, wincing.

"Go home. This is the big leagues now, and you're not cut out for this." Volkerosene smirked.

I bolted towards him, cerulean electricity pulsing around my darkened form. Volkerosene flipped and smashed his paw to the floor. A spike of earth crunched against my chest, using my own speed against me. The edges of my vision turned to black, and I felt the flame consume me.

"Go home, you runt."

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

I returned Static to his PokÃ©ball, my hands clenched at my sides.

"Hopefully that wasn't your master plan?" Enya cooed.

[You all set, Nova?] I said, careful not to let too much anger leak into his consciousness.

[Don't worry, Josh. I'll fight with the strength of both of us.]

"Go on, Volkerosene. Let's show the darkness why it has always been submissive to the light."

"\*\*\_StarVoid, show no mercy. Consume them in our wrath.\_\*\*"

\* \* \*

><p>I roared. I don't think I've ever done that before, but it just felt right. The Typhlosion took a step back, and looked startled.<p>

Good.

"Roast him alive, Volkerosene!"

"\*\*\_Tear him apart,\_\*\* \*\*\_StarVoid\_\*\*."

We circled each other, unsure of who would attack first. He broke the impasse first, striking at me with a hardened fist. I dodged and returned the blow, striking his exposed gut with my claws. He winced and shoved me away harshly, pounding me with a paw. I sprung up and dove at him, but he raced to the side spitting a wall of fire. I responded in kind, matching his ferocity with my own.

He faltered, his flame weakening. My flamethrower did the rest, blasting him backwards and throwing him into the room's flame.

"Who's next?" I roared, relishing the feeling of heat on my fur.

\* \* \*

><p>"Go, FlashPoint!" Enya shouted, sending out an experienced looking Monferno. He sent out two quick jabs, and swept the floor with his foot, daring me to face him. I stood my ground, glaring holes through his eyes. "Pound him to oblivion!"<p>

[Outrage.]

I didn't need any more instruction; I had been fighting back the feeling from the beginning of the fight. My eyes shone with light, and once again I was enveloped with power.

"Nope! Haha!" FlashPoint raced at me, flipping in midair and landing on my shoulders, smashing his paws in my face. I flinched, losing my

focus. He pounded me with a limb, sending me sprawling to the ground. "Get up, dragon! Get up!"

I growled and pushing myself to standing. The fire no longer felt so choking; it was invigorating and empowering. My eyes shone with light once more, and my claws returned, elongated and carved with color.

Flashpoint dove at me, and I countered with a swipe. He dodged expertly, knocking his fist against my muzzle. I roared again and struck out but missed again. FlashPoint dodged out of sight, and I whirled around angrily. I felt a sudden pain against my back, and fell again to the ground.

"Haha! You'd be more of a challenge if you stopped falling!" the Monferno grinned.

I dashed and flung my claw at his heart. He dodged to the right, but I predicted this and smashed him with my back foot. FlashPoint stumbled back disoriented, and I rushed to end him. He flipped backwards catching himself with his hands, and kicked with both his feet. He pushed me into the air by my gut.

I felt the blackness of unconscious bend at my mind, but I willed it away. I saw the ground approached me again, but again I willed it away. I saw myself losing the battle, and I willed reality to bend to my wishes.

I saw Monferno's eyes grow wide as I floated in the air, impervious to gravity.

"\*\*\_Die.\_\*\*" I ordered, diving upon him from the air. He stood there in complete shock as I ran him through, my claws catching him in his core before I threw him against the wall. He bounced off but I was already there, smashing him back into it. With one final kick, he flew across the room, returning to the floor with a crunch.

I was exhausted. I looked up to Josh for confirmation, and I noticed everyone in the room was staring at me. [What?]

[Nice wings.] Myst complemented me. I looked at my back, and I agreed. They suited me well.

## 24. The Voice Inside

(Josh POV)

[Dude. Major props; we'll talk after the battle, alright?]

[Okay!] Nova chirped happily. He walked to my side calmly, if a bit more clumsily than normal.

"\*\*\_If you have no other PokÃ©mon, I'll be taking that badge.\_\*\*"

"Leaving so soon?" Enya pouted, leaning on one of her flaming batons. "Are you so sure I can't give you a reason to stay?"

"\*\*\_My regrets, Enya. The light and the dark are not meant to dwell

in each other's company. Find vibrance and passion in another's light.\_\*\*"

Enya frowned, tossing me an orange badge. "Think of me, will you? If ever you finish your quest, and you're looking for companyâ€|"

\*\*\_Don't dwell on dreams, Enya. My heart is a void no mortal can fill.\_\*\*" And I turned and left the gym.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

[Your heart is a void?]

[Hmmm?]

[Doesn't that seem, I don't know, \_dark?\_] Myst frowned at me.

[Well, yeah, that's the point. Nightshade is supposed to be dark. That's me acting him out.]

[But your heart isn't a void. You're in love with Sandy.] she pointed out.

"Your pokemon are healed, sir." The nurse smiled at me.

"Thanks, you tâ€|t-take care now." I struggled not to say 'you too'.

"You as well." She smiled, and returned to her duties.

[Yes, I love her.] I turned back to Myst. [So, like, in a way, you could say she has my heart. Ergo, I don't have a heart.]

[But then she loves you too, right?] Nova chimed in. [And you have her heart?]

[Yeah?]

[So, didn't you guys just \_trade \_hearts? So you have Sandy's, and Sandy has yours?]

[I don't know if that's how it works.] I put a finger to my lips in thought.

[Either way, it wouldn't leave you heartless would it?] Mew asked.

[I suppose not. Maybe I was just being dramatic for NightShade's sake.]

[Well, I approve.] Skarr laughed from the air above us. [Melodrama is never lost on me.]

[Finally, someone that understands.] I laughed. Skarr cackled above me in kind.

[Oh! Oh!] Nova chirped. [You said you would talk to me after the battle! What did you think?]

[You did awesome\_, \_man.] I smiledâ€|then bit my lip. [Though honestlyâ€|I thought you would be taller.]

Nova now stood about four and a half feet tall, only slightly taller from his old Charmeleon self. Not just his height set him apart from the other Charizard; he was still covered in his normal light-orange fur, and his \_head \_was enormous. It made him look cute, but not exactly the ferocious dragon you'd expect a Charizard to be.

[I think he looks adorable.] Myst countered, snuggling up next to the dragon. Nova smiled and nuzzled her in turn.

[You two are going to give my diabetes.] I rolled my eyes, unclipping a pokeball from my belt and sending it out.

Static appeared of the scarlet, disoriented. [Whereâ€|oh damn it. Did I faint?]

[Yeah. Sorry.]

Static bowed, dejected. [Volkerosene said I wasn't fit to battle these higher level PokÃ©mon. That's what he said before I fainted.]

[Ready to prove him wrong?] I gave Static a challenging grin. [The next gym is ground. I'm going to need your hidden power ice to take them down.]

[You can count on it.] Static gave me a sharp nod.

[And you, Skarr?]

[As always, at your service.]

[I'll just be here, keeping your illusions.] Myst sighed.

[Don't worry, you'll get training in the Caves.] just saying the word made my heart race, but it seemed to pacify Myst. [Anyway, let's head out.]

[I can fly you!] Nova offered.

[I'm being replaced!] Skarr yelped.

[No, no! I-I just got these!] Nova pointed at his wings, flapping them experimentally. [I just, I wanted show off!]

[I'm kidding. It's fine.] Skarr waved his own wing carelessly, but I saw a look of regret as he turned away.

[Let's give you some time to use them before long distance flights, hmmm?] I suggested.

[Okay!]

[Alright!] Everyone disappeared in a flash of red, save Skarr, and my watch, who seemed to be smirking at me. [Are you ready, Skarr?]

[Am I ever not?] He smirked, and stretched his wings.

\* \* \*

><p>[Must you pry into <em>everything?<em>]

[It's my job to pry!]

[Then I relieve you of duty.]

Mew squirmed on my wrist, causing the watch to glow oddly [Hey! What are you guys talking about?]

[\_Josh \_here,] Skarr groaned. [Believes he can diminish the world's woes by talking about every facet of human emotion ad nauseam.]

[I wouldn't be pressing, but you gave me a weird look when Nova suggested flying me to Viridian.] I countered.

[Oh, and I suppose your extensive knowledge about Skarmory mentality deducted that my \_feelings \_were at fault?]

[Well, technically,] Mew began. [Your hydrocortisone hormones are fourteen percent more active than normal, which is conducive of experiencing a troubling or unpleasant event.]

Skarr growled.

[Don't worry Mew. Skarr's a bit difficult at times, but he always comes around.] I smirked.

Skarr turned to face me, flying through a cloud. [Difficult, am I?]

[Only occasionally.]

Skarr turned back to the sky in front of him, and glided lazily around a thermal. [Alright, fine. Yes, I was upset.]

[Why?]

[I know this sounds childish, butâ€¦] Skarr sighed into the wind. [Lately it seems we have less and less time together. I realize you have responsibilities to others as well â€" Sandy, Static, and the others â€" butâ€¦I miss you, I suppose.] Skarr hung his head. [I enjoy being with the others as well, but we rarely get any time alone like we use to. I remember when we were younger and we would fly all across Kanto, fighting Fearows and mocking each other insistently.] Skarr grinned nostalgically. [Iâ€¦I miss that. Now it seems the only time we have alone is when we fly. I supposeâ€¦I didn't want to lose that.]

[I'm sorry, Skarr. I didn't understand.]

[I didn't expect you to understand.] Skarr flapped a bit harder, gaining altitude. [You have responsibilities now. You have a title to achieve. The only constant in life is change, and I'm foolish to expect anything different.]

[That's not true. I hadn't thought about it before, but you're right. I've been neglecting you as an individual. Actually, all of you, come to think of it.] I thought.

[Neglect is too strong of a word. Neglect is what Matilda did to Nova.] Skarr pointed out.

[Still. I should make an effort to hang out with you all one on one too.]

[I wouldn't mind that.]

[Oh, also, may I ask something?]

[Go right ahead.]

[Why didn't you choose to utilize Mew last battle?] Skarr asked. I saw Mew's hands perk up to the eleventh and first hour respectively.

[I'm glad you asked! Mew, we should have this talk as well.] I turned to look at my clock.

[What about?] Mew asked, winking the clock at me. I felt unnerved.

[Well, your fight with Darkrai was impressive, butâ€¦] I bit my lip, trying to find a polite way to phrase my next statement. [It appeared, however, as if you may have not been fighting to your fullest, umâ€¦]

[You don't think I'm ready!] Mew squeaked outrageously.

[Yes and no.] I gulped. [You obviously have a lot of experience overall, but this form of yourself may not be quite asâ€¦|knowledgably about tactics, and your movepool-]

[I saved your life! I fought a darkrai! I single handedly knocked your entire party of PokÃ©mon prone when they ambushed me all at once!]

[You did save my life, but it almost cost yours in turn. You knocked all my pokemon down yes, but you barely did any damage, and you almost took enough damage to faint.]

[I took on Darkrai!]

[You were using psychic moves against him.] I thought quietly.

[What else!? I'm a psychic type â€" my moves were more effective against him.]

Skarr cringed. If there was any doubt in my mind that Mew wasn't ready, it was erased by that last statement.

[Mew.] Skarr spoke slowly and clearly. [Psychic type moves don't even affect dark types.]

[â€¦|Oh.]



We flew in silence for a long moment. I didn't want to embarrass Mew like that, but it was partially unavoidable, and partially necessary. More than trusting in his own power, he needed to learn to trust \_me. \_It was a hard and unpleasant lesson, but if we were going to be a team a line needed to be drawn.

[I guess being a newborn has its drawbacks.] Mew squirmed. [â€|W-what are we going to do? There are obvious gaps in my logic and mind â€" I feel inadequate.]

[Well, first things first,] I said. [You're not inadequate. You just need some help. Luckily, I know just the overdramatic bird for the job.]

[Oh?] Skarr turned to me with mock disgrace.

[Can you stop by Celadon mall on the way to Viridian?] I asked politely.

[Oh? Feeling nostalgic are we?] Skarr smirked, turning to face the wind.

[Always.] I laughed. [But not quite. There's something I need to get first.]

\* \* \*

><p><em>( ? POV)<em>

\_Failure.\_

The voice was back, brushing against my conscious like a feather dipped in venom. The scars in my mind let the voice in with no resistance, letting the poison of the words drip inside me like mucus. I wish I could say I was too jaded to care, but it hurt every. Single. Time. Every word was another twist of my personal knife, and every phrase another poison I choose to ingest.

How long had I sat here? I no longer knew the day, the week, the year. I no longer remembered the feeling of sunlight on my skin, or a sincere complement of a friend. I had alienated myself long ago; years, ever sinceâ€|

\_You're a disgrace.\_

I knew it all too well. The curtains were drawn, and a layer of dust covered my surroundings.

Suddenly, I heard a sound. It was unlike the voices; it was audible and sounded like a small creak. I looked up. Someone was opening my door.

I opened my mouth to great them, but no sound came out. How long had it been since I used my voice? With a lazy flick, I turned on my Pokespeak.

[Who goes there?] I demanded, standing up from my throne.

[\*\*\_Don't tell me you haven't expected me.\_\*\*] A dark man stood at

the doorway, smirking a brilliant but black smile. [\*\*\_I would loathe to appear rude and unannounced.\_\*\*]

[You've done well getting this far.] I slumped back into my chair, and the voices resumed their taunting. [Tell me. Has anyone else figured out your disguise?]

[\*\*\_The shadows need no disguise.\_\*\*] The man shrugged.

\_Fool.\_

\_Educate him.\_

\_Show him the weakness of pride.\_

\_Show him what hubris does to a mortal, and use it to crush him.\_

\_Crush him like it crushed you.\_

With a haunting smile, I pressed a hidden button on my throne. Sand began seeping through the walls, and a hot, dry heat oozed into the room.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

[It's a Sandstorm!] Myst yelped.

Sand began circling in the gym, wrapping around us and obscuring my view of the gaunt man in the chair. He had brown, disheveled hair and a loose, baggy blue shirt. His jeans were dirty and scuffed, but not torn. More than anything, he looked tired andâ€|unhealthy.

[Okay. We can still win.] I shrugged.

[No! You don't understand! If I become damaged I'll- arrrrgh!] Myst winced as the sand dug into her coat. The illusion vanished around me, and my disguise of Nightshade was gone.]

[It was dramatic while it lasted.] the man grinned.

[I'm trying to keep my face out of the spotlight.] I frowned.

\_Not like that'll work anymore.\_

[I'm not going anywhere.] the thin man slouched in his large chair.

\_He's lying.\_

I blinked. Why was I distrusting of this person? He was a gym leader after all, plus, he looked ratherâ€|

â€|unmotivated.

[Who are you?] I asked.

The man smiled, plucking a single Pok  ball from his belt. [Me? I am many things. Disgrace, self-loathing, dishonor. I am broken dreams, I am unmet goals. I am failure. Permanent and eternal.]

[Now who's being dramatic?]

The man laughed a slow, broken, hollow laugh.

I waited a moment before continuing. [So? What's your name?]

[Madness. Tragedy. Calamity. Ruin.] the man grinned. [How many more synonyms do you want?]

[You don't have a name?]

[I did, long ago. I was proud of my name, too. I was sure that name would mean something one day, and it almost did. Except it didn't.] He looked at me with soulless grey eyes. [No one has beaten the Elite Four in over fourteen years. You think you have a shot?]

[Yes.] I nodded.

[So did I.] He smiled sadly. [I beat them too. Lost against the Champion, though. With all my savings spent, had to get a job. Offered this. This became my life. My worth. I never accomplished my heart's desire. I was a failure, doomed to never succeed.]

\_His story sounds like mine.\_

I pushed my troubling thoughts aside. [Why didn't you just try again?]

[It's not that simple. People judge you for trying. Pretty soon you become the person that failed twice. Then three times, then four. They stop cheering for you. They stop noticing you. Soon, you stop cheering for you too. You'll realize you're just running through the motions, knowing you'll never truly succeed.]

\_Will that be me?\_

[So why do you stay here, then? You can't find another job that would make you happier?] I reasoned.

[No. My job is here, to crush the dreams of others as my own were.]

I smirked. [I can't help but notice you only have one Pok  ball.]

[I've only ever needed one.] He sighed quietly. [Only one should be forced to share in my suffering. Are you ready?]

\_Are you? He clearly has the upper hand here, you don't even-\_

[Gah!] I cried, covering my ears. [What is this gym doing to me!?!]

[The thoughts?] The man grinned madly. [My own design. Tinkered with

a Pokespeak for a few years to have it work correctly.]

\_Leave. Leave now. You'll never win.\_

The man leaned back into his chair. [What's it like, hearing the thoughts of your own doom?]

[Feelings are subjective! I won't allow your perspective to overpower my own!]

[Then allow my force to overpower you.] The man threw his Pok  ball onto the arena, and I threw my own.

[Go, Skarr!] I commanded.

A Nidoking emerged second, his roar penetrating through the swirling sands.

[Go, Morphine.] the gym leader ordered. [End it. End it all.]

\* \* \*

><p>(Skarr POV)<p>

\_Josh, what were you thinking!?!\_

[That's a poison type; my strategy is useless!] I yelled. [What do you want me to do, stall it to death!?!]

Josh gulped. [Actually, that wouldn't work either. If you roosted once, he would hit you with a super effective earthquake.]

[Why did you send me in then!?!] I growled.

[I assumed he would send in something that wasn't immune to poison!]

[Well, switch me out!]

[Argh, I can't!] Josh winced. [He only has one Pok  mon; switching would just put us at a disadvantage!]

[What should I do then!?!]

[Just go pure offense. Brave Bird.]

\_I'm defensive, you fool! Or do you already know that I'm doomed!?!\_

The Nidoking brandished his claws in the air, powering up his future attacks.

"Kraaaa!" I screeched, diving at him from the air. I smacked into his abdomen, gracelessly flying straight into his gut. I recoiled and attempted to regain altitude, but a massive purple fist grabbed my back leg and held me in place.

"Submit." Morphine ordered, his face inches from my own.

\_This is going to hurt  !\_

"I refuse!" I scratched, attempting to bash him with my skull. He held me at arms distance with a cold look of disapproval, and opened his crooked maw. A torrent of flame engulfed me, causing my wings to flare up red hot. I screamed and attempted to resist, but he just held on tighter. At last I broke free, but my wings crumpled beneath me, and I fell to the floor.

The sandstorm raged above me. Somehow I was still conscious, but everything was hazed in red and black. I fought to remain cognizant, and pushed myself to standing with my disobedient wings.

\_Josh expected more from you.\_

I stumbled, and landed back in the sand. I felt a massive weight push against my back, and saw the Nidoking standing above me.

"I didn't give you a choice." Morphine's hollow words echoed in my skull as I felt his foot crunch into the small of my back. The world faded out of view, and the bliss of unconsciousness deprived me of the awareness of my failure.

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

\_He's not going to choose you.\_

\_Worthless.\_

\_Unwanted.\_

"Urkâ€|" I winced, trying to cover my head from the dark thoughts of the gym. W-why were they so bad now? Hadn't I become stronger? Hadn't I come to terms with my strengths and weaknesses? Hadn't I understood that I was loved?

\_They pity you.\_

\_You're around due to a sense of obligation, not love.\_

\_Who could love you, after all?\_

[Nova!] Josh ordered. [I'm guessing the Nidoking has Earthquake, so we know three of its four moves. You're resistant Flamethrower, and downright immune to Earthquake. His Home Claws just powers up his attack, so that also won't hurt you. You ready?]

\_You'll fail.\_

\_You'll cry.\_

\_It's all you'll ever do.\_

\_All you'll ever be good for.\_

[I-I don't know if I can.] I shivered, clutching my tail.

[Pay attention to me.] Josh nodded sharply in my direction. [I believe in you, Nova. I love you, and you can do this. Don't pay

attention to the gym's voices.]

\_You don't deserve his love.\_

[Okay! ] I jumped, and clumsily flew onto the arena. The Nidoking was ready.

"Submit." Morphine ordered, his eyes sunken.

"I won't give in."

"I'm not giving you a choice." The Nidoking rushed at me, jumping into the air. I stopped flying on impulse, and fell like a stone to avoid getting clobbered.

\_That was close.\_

\_Are you so sure you can dodge next time?\_

[Outrage, Nova!]

\_Do it.\_

\_You've proven you're stronger than your fear.\_

\_This should be easy for you.\_

\_Unless it's not.\_

\_And you've learned \_\_\*\*nothing.\*\*\_

I struggled, but the feeling of invulnerability was lost. I gave Josh a panicked expression.

\_You're worse than useless.\_

\_You're a liability.\_

\_A problem.\_

\_A danger to Josh's dream.\_

\_To the other's dreams.\_

\_To your dream.\_

\_Your failure.\_

[That's fine! Dragon claw or flamethrower!]

Maybe I couldn't summon my dragon, but I could always summon flame. A blast of heat shout out of my mouth, covering the Nidoking in flame. He leapt up, his armored scales still aflame, and smashed me back on the ground. His fist felt like a sledgehammer, and my muzzle crunched as I hit the floor.

[No!] I heard Josh scream.

I felt the all too familiar feeling of blackness evade my vision, and everything faded around me.

\_Useless. It's all you'll ever be.\_

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

Smack Down. Of course his final move would be smack down. The only rock move a Nidoking could learn that could take down a Charizard.

\_You should have predicted that.\_

\_You're losing your edge.\_

\_You think you can beat the Elite four with those skills?\_

\_You're losing it, Josh.\_

[I'm waiting, trainer.] The gym leader spoke, sinking ever deeper into his stained, leather chair.

[Let me do it.] Myst growled.

[Myst, no.] I shook my head. [You have no advantage, no trick up your-]

[He beat Nova. He hurt him. I want him to pay.] She snarled, digging her paw in the sand.

\_Do it.\_

\_What do you have to lose?\_

\_They already don't trust you now.\_

\_Two losses in a row. Two Pok  mon fainted.\_

\_Think you can gain their trust again?\_

\_Doubt it.\_

I ground my teeth, trying to ignore the dark thoughts coursing through my mind. [Okay. Disguise yourself as Mew. It'll throw him off.]

[Yes sir.] She grinned a vengeful grin.

\* \* \*

><p>(Myst POV)<p>

[Go, Mew!]

I faked a toss of a Pok  ball, and became my illusion. It wouldn't last long in the sandstorm and would flat out \_shatter\_ if I was attacked directly, so I would have to be careful. Still, the look on the gym leader's face as I appeared as a Mew was worth every second. Morphine's face was even better    his sunken eyes were sunken no longer, and were practically bulging out of their skulls.

[Night Daze!]

"S-submit." Morphine ordered.

\_Hah! He's scared of me!\_

\*\*\_He's not scared of you. He'll break your illusion soon enough, and you'll be left defenseless.\_\*\*

\_Except for my attacks? Soâ€¦I'll be reduced to fighting at everyone else's level?\_

\*\*\_You're no match for him.\_\*\*

\_I've fought bigger.\_

I laughed, mocking the darkness inside myself. Perhaps this trick would work on others, but it had no effect on me.

\*\*\_He'll crush you. Your boyfriend, your trainer. You'll lose; you're a failure.\_\*\*

\_You kidding? It's impossible to be a failure and look \_this good.\_

I posed for a moment, although no one could see me. Morphine charged, and I sidestepped easily, using Mew's form as a cover.

\*\*\_You'll never win!\_\*\*

\_I always win.\_

I shot a pulse of darkness, hitting a sensitive looking spine in the Nidoking's back. He roared and stomped the ground, sending up jagged spikes all across the arena. I smirked and evaded them all.

\*\*\_You can't keep this up forever. Do you plan on outrunning all your problems?\_\*\*

\_Hey, I've gotten this far, haven't I?\_

Morphine rushed to punch me and I used his own strength against him, causing him to punch himself in his face with a blast of dark energy.

\*\*\_T-that was a fluke!\_\*\*

\_I know, right!? I couldn't do that again if I tried!  
Hahahaha!\_

\*\*\_You think all this is a joke!?\_\*\*

\_I think you're a joke. You're a pathetic excuse for an illusion of the mind.\_

The sand dug at my coat, distracting me long enough for me to lose sight of my illusion. The Nidoking huffed, and charged me again. He seemed smaller than before.



I didn't even bother to dodge. I socked him in his stomach, then sucker punched his face. He crashed on the area's floor in a triumphant see of dust.

\*\*\_You'll never be where you want to be! You're a puppet; a playing of your trainer!\_\*\*

\_I'm exactly where I want to be, doing exactly what I want to do, with the people I want to do it with.\_

I smirked triumphantly. People could doubt me if they choose, but I would never doubt myself.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

[So you've won.]

[So I have.] I nodded.

\_You still have to fight the cave.\_

\_You still have to confront your parents.\_

[I'll be taking that badge now.] I held out my hand. The sooner I got out of this gym, the better.

The man reached under his chair, pulled out a bin, and tossed a badge out of it. [There. Beware the power of dreams " the closer you come to achieving them, the greater the despair of failure.]

[Failure is a part of life. Heck, failure is a part of \_victory.\_] I laughed. [Victory is forever; failure is finite. You have to be bad at something before you become good at it, and you have to become good at something before you become great. Failure is an intrinsic process of achieving your dreams.]

[You are so naive.] The man shook his head, staring at the floor.

[â€|I suppose I've been called worse.] I shrugged, pocketing the badge. [Come on, Myst. Let's get out of here.]

\* \* \*

><p>[I would like to speak with you.] Mew requested formally, once we had healed the rest of our team.<p>

[Sure.] I smiled, already happy just to be free of the dark, oppressing gym. [What's up?]

[Do you fear for that trainer? The gym leader we just fought?]

[What do you mean?]

Mew shuddered. [Iâ€|I looked into his mind. The dark thoughts affect him as well, and he chooses to subject himself to that every day, for hours. Days, weeks, months. It isn't healthy " \_he \_isn't healthy.]

[What should we do?]

Mew frowned, his hands turning to the seven and five hours. [He won't listen to reason, I guarantee that. Perhaps once this is all over, once you have more prestige due to your title, you could institute a new gym in its place. Suggest he get psychiatric help, perhaps.]

[Will do.]

[Thank you.] Mew nodded, which tickled my wrist. [That puts me at ease.]

[Alright, good. Now that that's out of the way, let's say hi to everyone.] I smiled, tossing a plethora of pokeballs into the air. Everyone was released, save Mew, who was already on my wrist.

[Sorry! I couldn't, I just-] Nova hugged my leg, shaking.

[It's okay, I understand. You did your best, and that's all I'll ever ask. I picked him up, and hugged him. He nuzzled me appreciatively, and to my surprise, his eyes stayed relivively dry.

\_Relatively.\_

[My apologies as well.] Skarr mumbled.

[That was my bad, Skarr. You're not meant to go against poison types; I was just kind of forced into that one.] I shrugged. I offered my arms out for a hug, and Skarr rolled his eyes and accepted. A chorus of 'awwww's' went off as Skarr quietly grumbled to himself. [And lastly, \_amazing job \_as always Myst, I think we'll all agree that your performance was absolutely-]

[You're beautiful.] Nova interrupted me, staring transfixed at Myst's new form.

Myst blushed, pushing her dark scarlet hair from her eyes. [Complements are just illusions in their own right; I should know. I won't be taken by words without action; words without act are as meaningless as-] Myst was cut mid-phrase as Nova pressed his muzzle to hers, silencing whatever monologue Myst was going to say. After a moment, he released her, and Myst stared back with a hazed, starry expression in her obscure, ruby eyes.

[You're beautiful.] Nova repeated, holding her in his arms.

[Get a room!] Static laughed.

Myst made a rude gesture to Static behind Nova's back.

[What does that mean?] Nova squinted.

[-And we're off to my funeral!] I yelped, desperately \_not \_wanting to have that discussion. [Everyone ready to go? Super! Mew, you know the plan? Same with you, Skarr? Great! Alright, all aboard the guilt express! Next stop, misery!] I hopped onto Skarr's back without his

permission, earning me an unamused glare.

[Josh, are you ready for this?] Myst frowned. [Shouldn't you think this out more, maybe-]

[Nope.] I grinned a manic grin. [If I think about it anymore I'll convince myself not to go, and then I'll be a liar. Nope, we're going, and we're not thinking about anything. My mind is completely blank!]

[Josh. You're smarter than this.] Nova frowned. [You realize that this is just going to-]

[Oh, would you look at the time!] I looked at Mew, who have me an incredulous look. [Looks like we're might be late to my funeral! We better hurry, or we might not make it in time! If only I had planned the day better!]

[I can fly us there in time.] Skarr shrugged. [What's more important is for us to think this through.]

[No, I don't think that's the case. Nope, nope nope. And I'm the trainer, so you should all listen to me.]

Skarr, Nova, and Myst looked expectantly at Static.

[What?] Static yelped. [I'm not going to try to reason with him. I know how he gets. Just let him burn it out of his system, then he'll be responsive to logic again.]

Deep down, I knew they were right. I knew I was being stubborn and stupid, but in that same place, I knew visiting my parents was a \_bad idea.\_ But I had made a promise, soâ€

[Alright Skarr, fly me to Mom's house. Let's try to make this as quick and impersonal as we can!]

Skarr sighed as I returned everyone else to their PokÃ©balls, save Mew. [I think you're making a poor decision.]

[Me too.] I smiled madly. [Let's do this.]

\* \* \*

><p>[I'm worried about you.]<p>

[That's a reasonable response.]

Skarr turned to me, looking rather sick. [Josh. I won't disobey you, but I please â€ think this through. It doesn't matter if you'll be late; just take a moment to think-]

[We're almost here, Skarr. If you have another alternative that isn't lying, say it now.]

Skarr turned away, and bowed his head.

I sighed. [Yeah. Me too, buddy.]

[Be careful.]

I shook my head, clearing my mind for what I was about to do. The grass below me was a sheet of green, before it gave way to a sparse grouping of trees, then a clearing. In the center, a gathering of people stood around a casket. I half expected my parents not to remember me asking for an outdoor funeral; I suppose it's the small things you remember in the end.

[Ready?] I asked, lifting my leg over Skarr dangerously, teetering over his edge at a dizzying height.

[â€|Yes.] he choked.

[Yes.] Mew confirmed.

Skarr flew right above my casket, and I fell.

## 25. Blew a casket

CRUNCH

The casket splintered under my weight before Mew diverted the energy away from me, causing a large dust cloud to blast the audience. I winced, and stood up.

"Hi everyone!" I smiled meekly. I stood there for a moment, waving the dust away with a hand. Once it cleared, I saw the horrified faces of everyone in the audience. My neighbors, my family, my parents. Jake.

Jake?

I blinked, and turned to my former classmate. "Jake? What are you doing here?"

"J-just, y'know, paying respectsâ€|I guess." The awkward jock answered, shrugging his massive shoulders.

"We weren't even friends." I realized how harsh that sounded. "I mean, I didn't dislike you or anything, butâ€|we hardly knew each other."

"We had a small class; everyone knew everyone. I guess, in another life, I would like to think weâ€|I don't know. Maybe we would've hung out more."

"That means a lot, man." I nodded to him with respect. He hunched slightly, embarrassed by his bluntness. "Anyway!" I turned back to my audience, most of which were still giving me horrified looks. "Thank you all for coming! Truly, it means a lot that you've all come. Honestly, I expected a smaller crowd. Who knew I was so important?" I let a small blush cover my cheeks. "Don't be shy! You all look like you've seen a ghost!"

[Joshâ€|you're scaring them.] Mew whispered. The minister next to me clutched his cross tightly, and looked at me with terrified, dark eyes.

"Come on guys!" I turned to everyone. Mrs. Shriver, my neighbor,

looked petrified with fear. My own parents were stone.

"Dad!" I laughed, trying to illicit some kind of response. "You're shorted then I remember! I mean, you were \_almost \_six feet taller than I was, if you know what I-"

[Josh, shut up.] Skarr urged.

"Mom! You brought me flowers. I'm surprised it wasn't a calculator, or perhaps a fax machine. Maybe I could use my time in the afterlife crunching some numbers."

"Josh, that's enough." My father ordered, his voice wavering.

"Is it? It only took my \_death \_to bring her to her senses." I growled.

"I'm serious." his deep voice shook with emphasis.

"I'm \_dead \_serious." I smirked a half-crazed grin. "You could say I'm even being \_grave.\_"

"Josh, stop!" My mom screamed, covering her ears. Someone ran into the woods.

"Anyway, to the rest of you!" I gestured to the crowd. "I apologize for my delay; I didn't want to be \_cryptic, \_but I had other, very important things to attend to.

[Josh, control your adrenalin levels.] Mew encouraged. [You're becoming unstable.]

[And to my parents!] I gave a big wave. [Instead of burying me, let's bury the hatchet instead! We're making the other's uncomfortable, all with this bickering. Let's keep our \_de\_composure, at least until we're home, alright?]

"Get away from us, demon!" The priest thrust his cross at me.

"Oh, come now. I'm trying my best, even if my jokes are coming of as a bit \_stiff\_." I waited, but no one was laughing. "Anyone? Damn, I was sure that one would reach it's deathtination." No takers. "Well, darn. I was dead-sure that one would work."

[Josh, stop.] Mew ordered desperately.

My heart was racing in my chest, and all I could think of were other puns.

"Josh, get down here." My father demanded.

"Come now!" I addressed my parents. "I'm just trying to urn your affection! I admit, ever since our rather \_rotten \_departure I've felt \_mortified\_. Even if my mummy here was being a bit of an o-bitch-urar- ]

A steel wing connected with the back of my head, and I fell to the floor. The wooden pedestal danced in front of my eyes as I felt myself being dragged off the stage. My head throbbed, and I felt myself being dropped in the grass.

"Is he alright?"

"Is that really him?"

"What was with him?"

"We need to bring him to the house. Come on, Keith."

Something grabbed my midsection, and hosted me into the air.

[Thank you, Skarr.]

[Don't mention it, Mrs. Karren. He wouldn't normally be like this, butâ€¦]

[Circumstances, I realize.]

And the darkness overcame my sight. For a while I faded in and out of consciousness, hearing bits and pieces of conversations not meant for my ears.

\* \* \*

><p>[More than that.]<p>

[Self-imposed pressure.]

[Self-imposed?]

[What are you implying, bird?]

[A gentleman never implies.]

[Good.]

[â€¦without intention.]

\* \* \*

><p>"â€¦too hard."<p>

"Or not hard enough."

"You want to kill him?"

"I don't want him to die, Keith."

"He's not a boy anymore, Margret."

"So what? We let him run off and go get himself killed? Again?"

"I won't have him leave like he did last time. If he leaves, it will be of his own accord, and we'll be there standing by his side."

"You're always like this."

"â€¦"

\* \* \*

><p>[If you killed himâ€|]<p>

[Relax. I barely nicked him.]

[He's human! A nick could kill!]

[Stop it, you two. Fighting won't help us.]

[Actually, fighting's got us this far.]

[Amusing.]

[His pulse has risen twenty-four percent. I believe he is regaining consciousness.]

I opened my eyes, and yawned. I was in my old bed, and my PokÃ©mon were all around me.

[Hey!] Static bounced on top of me, squishing my stomach. [You're awake! How's life, bedface?]

I groaned, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. [Hey, Staticâ€|]

[Nice to see you're awake without brain damage.] Mew smiled. [It is currently eleven in the morning the following day.]

[We were so scared!] Nova tackled me from the side in a small but meaningful hug.

[You made an ass of yourself.] Skarr frowned.

[How do you know?] I accused, making my way to the bathroom to make myself presentable.

[Mew explained what had occurred.]

[I thought it was funny.] Nova offered.

[Why would you do that?] Myst asked.

I closed the bathroom door, and slumped against it. [I don't know. Nerves.]

[It's been a long time since you've done something like that.] Static mentioned quietly.

[Ever since I left my parents, yeah.]

[You've done this before?] Myst asked.

[I've done a lot ofâ€|irrational things.]

Nova pawed at the door.

[Give me a moment.] I washed my face, and made myself presentable.

[Your parents are waiting for you downstairs.] Skarr

mentioned.

[Thanks.] I stood at the top of the stairs, looking down.  
[â€|justâ€|give me a moment.]

\* \* \*

><p>"Lunch will be ready in a moment." My mother turned away, a grimace permanently etched in her face.<p>

"Oh. Thank you."

"Mmmm." She grunted.

Dad was sitting at the table with a worn newspaper clutched in his massive palms. "Josh! Good to see you're awake." A small smirked cracked his stoic face as he saw me, and he let out a small chuckle. "Created quite the commotion, you know. Our poor neighbors were suggesting an exorcism."

"Oh good lord." I chuckled, pulling up a seat. "They would do it to, you know. Bring some relic from Lavender Town and wave it all about."

"Grind it into powder and pour it in your soup."

"â€|Anyway, I just wanted toâ€|apologize." I began, a pit in my stomach. "I wasn't-"

My father stood up, and put a massive hand through my hair. "Son, never apologize to me. No amount of remorse could make up for \_our \_lack of supporting you."

"T-thank you." I blinked with surprise.

"Thank \_you.\_" He smiled in return. "For coming back."

\* \* \*

><p>We all sat around the formal dining room, which was the only table in the house large enough to seat all of my PokÃ©mon, myself, <em>and <em>my parents. With a grin, I acknowledged they were one place short â€" they hadn't yet learned about Mew.

Mew had been strangely quiet recently, in fact. My watch clicked quietly at my side, ever spinning backwards in time.

[Our neighbors are getting anxious.] My mother frowned, pouring soup for everyone at the table. Static and Skarr looked at her warily, but the others looked cheerful and optimistic.

[What do you mean?] I asked.

[After the way you acted yesterday. You did quite some damage.]

Nova gave her a concerned look. [B-but he didn't mean to!]

[It doesn't matter what he meant. His actions were uncalled for.] She glared through the small Charizard.



My father sighed, and gave her a weary look. "Honey."

"What?" She spat. My father just shook his head. [Augh, you're always like that. Say something or don't. Now, Josh.] She turned to face me, slowly pouring the soup. [You've created difficulties for\_me \_now. Now \_I \_have to face them because of your negligence. Not to mention the heartache and pain you put me through when you left us.]

My blood began to simmer as I clutched my spoon.

[What were you thinking!?] She spat, glaring at me with the ladle in her hands. [Do you know what you put your poor father through? What you put \_me \_through?] her thoughts reverberated with emphasis. I ground my teeth, frustration and anger clenching my fists. [Your father sat on the porch \_every day \_looking for you. I cooked a third portion every day for supper waiting for you to \_fail\_,] Nova flinched. [so I could pick up the pieces. Do you know what that does to a person?]

[Walking around without family to support you?] Skarr screamed, taking me completely by surprise. [Yeah, he knew what that was like. Were you there in the beginning when he would cry in his sleep? When the emptiness consumed in from the inside? What kind of family were \_you\_?] Skarr flapped his wings angrily, knocking down everything from the table. [\_We \_were his family. \_We\_believed in him, \_we \_supported him, and \_we're \_the reason \_we all \_succeeded.]

[You call \_this \_success? You call \_this \_a family?] My mother motioned at Skarr, as if she was about to slap him. [What do you have to show? A bunch of mouths to feed, and a wasted year. \_That's \_what you have to show!]

Quietly, I reached into my pocket and grabbed my trainer case, tossing it on the table. Eight glittering badges shone back. My father's eyes widened, and my mother was speechless.

[That's what he has to show!] Static roared, his tiny paws clamed at his sides. [We \_did it! \_Without you! And after this, we're going to \_wreck\_ Victory Cave, we're going to \_destroy \_the Elite Four,\_demolish \_the Champion, and we're all going to become the strongest team in Kanto, led by the strongest trainer \_ever!\_]

[Trainers have gotten eight badges before. They're the ones in the news reports, having their bones dragged out of the Cave.] my mother whispered.

"Margret!" My father urged.

[I'm not burying you again, Josh!] my mother screamed, knocking over my father's coffee.

[I don't intend for me \_or \_my dreams to die.] I spoke darkly.

The room was still for a moment, and the tension in the room began to fade.

[Well. It's been lovely to see you both again.] Sarcasm dripped from my tongue as I grabbed my jacket and threw it on. [Unfortunately I have things I must attend to, and, reluctantly, I must take my leave.

Take care.]

[Josh! Get your ass back here!] my mother smashed her hand on the table.

I opened the door, and the outside wind blew strongly, rustling my jacket around my sides.

[JOSH!] My mom grabbed my jacket roughly, but was stopped by a turquoise field of energy, and sent back into her own chair.

[Thanks.] I nodded towards my watch.

[Anytime.]

I stepped out the door, with my Pok  mon trailing behind me.

[Skarr. Can you fly me to the mall?] I asked, throwing a leg around his metallic exterior.

[The mall?] He asked, as I returned the others to their Pok  balls. [Weren't we just there a few hours ago?]

[I forgot a few things.]

[Whatever you say.] he shrugged, flexing his wings in preparation.

"Wait!" my father's voice rang from inside the house. Skarr looked at me expectantly.

[    Let him come.] I decided. My father ran out of the house, and crushed me in a hug.

"I have so, so many regrets, Josh. I don't want this to be another." He shook, his arms wrapped tightly around me. "Don't let this be like last time. Promise me you'll return."

I knew what I had to say, though it tasted like ash on my tongue. "I promise."

"I love you, son."

"I love you too, dad."

Keith sighed heavily, as if a large burden was removed from his mind. "Your mother loves you as well, even if    she has difficulty expressing it."

"    I know." I sighed into the wind.

"If you need anything, we're just a phone call away. We will help, you know. Even if it's hard."

"I won't need your help."

"I know." He put a hand on my shoulder, and I could almost make out tears in his dark, emotionless eyes. "But call anyway. We'll have a spot here waiting for you, when you come back a legend."

He got to me. I wiped my own eyes with a sleeve and gave him a weary grin. "I'll take you up on that, dad."

"Alright. Take care! Stay safe!" My father waved goodbye as Skarr took to the air. [And take care of my son for me, you hear? I only have one!]

[Will do, Mr. Karren. Will do.] Skarr chuckled as we flew into the broad, promising blue sky.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

As I flew over Kanto, the sun ignited the horizon in a sea of color.

I was home.

I was hundreds of feet in the air, with the deafening wind howling through my hair, but I was at peace. There was something to reassuring about being where I belonged, not necessarily in position but in \_life. \_Everything I needed I had in my pack, and I was pursuing my dream.

I was accomplishing my dream.

[This is freedom.] I smiled, letting go of Skarr with one hand to feel the wind blow through my fingers.

[Hmmm?]

[This. The open sky, the fresh, crisp air.] I laughed into the wind. [This is freedom.]

[Hardly.] Skarr snorted. [\_I'm \_the one flying you. You're bound by my whims - I could take you anywhere.]

[If that's true, then why are we going to Celadon, where I want to go?]

[Perhaps our whims coincide.] Skarr grinned, his amber eyes shining.

[How fortunate.]

Skarr tilted his head ever so slightly, and changed course. [Ladies and gentlemen of the flight deck.]

[Hmmm?]

[This is your captain speaking. We may experience some slight turbulence...] Skarr suddenly dove downward, causing me to yelp. [...and this is a reminder to double-check that your restraints are firmly in place.]

[Skaaaaarr!] I screamed, laughing as we soared at ridiculous speeds. [What are you doing?]

[Please refrain from smoking, walking, or using the lavatories as we make our decent. Thank you.]

[You're insane!]

Skarr smashed against \_something \_with his left wing, causing it to explode into a mess of red. He flipped upside-down and caught it in his beak, then corkscrewed and righted himself once more. [Thank you once again for your patience. Looks like clear skies from here on out. Thank you for flying on Skarmory airlines on your non-stop service to Celadon.]

I turned, trying to make out what was in Skarr held in his mouth. [What just happened?]

Skarr grinned, turning to me with half a dead Sparrow hanging from the side of his mouth. [I was hungry for a mid-flight snack.]

[Ewww, Skarr!]

[What? I've seen you eat Fearow before. This is no different.]

[Yeah, but it's \_cooked, \_and seasoned and everything first!]

[So what, I don't mutilate, burn, and fowl my food before I eat it, and that disturbs you?]

[Actually, I would consider that Sparrow properly mutilated.]

Skarr chuckled. [Well, perhaps I was trying to be a bit fancy. I knew I could catch it in my mouth, but I didn't know if I could cut it in half mid-flight.]

[And?]

[Success!]

[We're going to need to land by a lake before we get to Celadon - you look like you just murdered someone.] I giggled, looking at Skarr's bloody maw.

[Why? Humans should see me and tremble!] Skarr laughed, lazily making his way to one of Celadon's many lakes.

\* \* \*

><p>( ? POV)<p>

I felt most at home in the dark. I was never a troublemaker even as a child, but something about the night made me calm. I felt as if I belonged when the shadows came, and I felt a kinship with the slivers of the moon. I was lying down, and the world was a glorious shade of black - that perfect shade where you're unsure whether your eyes are open or closed. I would have been content to exist in this twilight forever slowly easing myself to sleep had it not been for the troubled breathing beside me.

Perhaps to others it would appear as if she was sleeping, but I knew better. Years of companionship had taught me when she was troubled,

and when she was just feigning sleep. I didn't need the light to tell me she was distressed, or where the curve of her stomach would lay on the bed. I curled around her gently, and caressed her with a palm.

"Do you hate me?" she whispered into the dark.

"I could never hate you."

"I don't understand how you couldn't. I hate myself."

"You had your reasons, and he has his."

"I promised you - I promised us...I would be better than this." She sighed, clutching a pillow between her arms.

"It was better this time."

"He still ran away, Keith. Just like last time. I caused it then and I caused it now."

The soft sound of tears tore at my heart, and I clutched Margret all the tighter. "It was better this time. He will come back, and he'll be okay. I promise."

"How do you know?"

"Because he's just as stubborn as you." I smiled, finding her cheek in the midnight and placing a small kiss. "That and your hair, that's what he got from you."

She laughed lightly, then sighed. "I am sorry...It's hard for me to put the past behind, but when this is all over, I will apologize to him."

"That'll mean a lot to Josh."

"Do you think it will be enough?"

"I think it would speak mountains." I nodded, resting my head against my arm.

"...Thank you."

"Always, my love."

\* \* \*

><p>"Taking a journey?" The cashier smirked.<p>

"Taking \_the \_journey." I nodded, zipping up my pack. That was the last of the supplies I would need from Celadon, including all of the items I would need for the Cave. You could never be too prepared, after all...

[Are you ready yet?] Skarr flapped his wings impatiently.

[Almost. Let me check everything one more time.]

[You are the \_champion \_of over-preparation.]

[Better that than the alternative.] I shrugged.

[Of what? Being normal?]

[Worse; underprepared.] I gulped, zipping up my bag for the fifth time. [Over prepared people have sore shoulders. Underprepared people don't make it out of the Cave. At least, not alive.]

[Relax. You won't perish in our care.] Skarr waved a wing.

[Forgive me if I still take precautions.] I grinned, slinging my pack over my shoulders. [Alright! Vermillion or bust!]

[Finally.] Skarr lowered himself, and I hopped on his back. [Any longer and I would have begun to rust.]

\* \* \*

><p>(Guardian of the Eight Trial, POV)<p>

"Relax. No one's come in years. Don't be so edgy."

My eyes were glazed over with trepidation, and sweat trickled down my neck like blood. I could all but hear her lamentation, crying out for a sacrifice. She could smell her food coming, and she was growing impatient. We had kept her waiting for far too long...

"It's just a cave, man. Relax."

"It's not \_just \_a cave." I shivered. "There's something \_in \_there. Something's gonna happen. I know it. I \_feel \_it."

"Don't go mental on me, Jim." Tobias waved off my concern. "If you keep sputtering about the cave being alive they're gonna lock you up, man."

"Call me what you want. I've been guarding her for nearly a decade and I \_know \_something's up. I-I've been having dreams."

"How about we switch places? You guard the seventh trial, and I'll guard the eighth. Maybe being too close to the entrance has been screwing with you, you know?"

"I'm not crazy!" I shouted, grabbing his smooth white jacket with my sweaty palms. "I \_know \_what I saw!"

"What did you see, then?" Tobias frowned, crossing his arms.

"The Cave. It's...it's like she's \_growing.\_" I looked behind my shoulder, just to ensure the Cave hadn't moved. "See the shadows by the entrance? They're \_bigger\_. She's extending. She's reaching for something, and I know what it is. It's a man."

"A man?"

"A man. A man made of shadows of the darkest night. I see him in my dreams - his piercing red gaze, and the spikes jutting out of his inky flesh. He's the only one that can sate her hunger. He's the one she craves."

"Maybe you need to lie down, Jim. Take the day off. Get some rest."

"He's coming. And when he gets here, I don't know what he'll do."

"No one is coming. We're gonna get you home, get you some water, and tomorrow this will all be just a--"

"First Guardian to Two through Eight, do you copy?" A gruff, female voice demanded though the radio clipped to Tobias' belt.

"Seventh and Eight Guardian, loud and clear. What do you need, Number One?"

"T-there's a trainer here, a-at least, I think he's a trainer."

"Huh?"

"You know that Night-Blight or whatever thing that was on the news? He's here...and he has all the badges."

Tobias took a long look at the radio, before cautiously pressing the speaker again. "What's he look like?"

"Like something out of a horror film, man." One responded, her voice rough but shaky. "He was pitch black but with glowing red eyes, and these weird spikes sticking out of--"

"\*\*\_When you finish your idle gossip, I am here to prove my worth.\_\*\*"

I froze. My stomach twisted into knots, and I felt sick. Slowly I turned, and I saw the product of my nightmares standing before me.

"\*\*\_I have obtained every badge, and bested every test.\_\*\*"  
Nightshade spoke, presenting his badges. "\*\*\_Now I will best your 'Cave', defeat your masters, and the world shall once again recognize the strength of the shadows. Do you have reason to oppose me, or shall I continue undeterred?\_\*\*"

"You may pass." Tobias spoke for both of us, nudging me out of the way. The monster strolled past both of us, leaving a trail of shadows behind himself that slowly melded into the aether.

"W-what will you do to us?" I choked out.

The beast turned to me, burning a hole with his blazing red eyes. "\*\*\_Speak your mind, mortal.\_\*\*"

"Once you win, what will you do?"

The shade smiled. "\*\*\_Disappear. What more do you expect from a shadow? Once I have my moment in the light, I will be gone.\_\*\*"

"You...you won't harm us?"

\*\*\*\_What would I gain from your demise?\_\*\*\*

"I thought you were evil."

\*\*\*\_Evil may lurk inside of me, but can you not claim the same of yourself? Our actions speak for our hearts, and mine only yearns for ambition.\_\*\*\* NightShade gave a curt nod, and headed towards the cave.

"Wait!" I screamed. Nightshade turned to me. "You can't go in there! S-something waits for you. Something...dark. Darker than you. Darker than us all!"

\*\*\*\_It is not my destiny to fear the darkness.\_\*\* \*\*\_I am forged from-\_\*\*\*

"You don't understand!" I shouted, wringing my hand together.

NightShade walked over to me, and placed a hand on my shoulder. \*\*\*\_Believe me, I understand. I know what I risk, yet destiny demands I continue.\_\*\*\* Nightshade sighed, and for one brief moment, he looked very, very human. \*\*\*\_You can feel her too, can't you Guardian?\_\*\*\* he asked. \*\*\*\_She demands a sacrifice.\_\*\*\*

"Be careful."

Nightshade smiled warily, and turned towards the Cave. \*\*\*\_I was made from shadows, Guardian. To others, the Cave symbolizes fear and mystery, but to me?\_\*\*\* NightShade gave me one last grin. \*\*\*\_To me...I'm finally going home.\_\*\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

Victory Road. The walk, presenting my badges, and taking the first steps up to the Champion. The fresh, vibrant grass brushed against the gold sculpted statues of heroes of lore, and of heroes to come. The steps to the cave were worn with time; each held a story of steps taken by legends, steps taken by Masters, and steps taken by those the cave would claim.

I noticed my step caused a crack in the staircase to widen. What would my destiny entail?

[A...are we going in?]

[Do we have a reason not to?]

[Well, I mean, we could always train m-more...]

[We could train for a lifetime.] Static rolled his eyes. [Of course we're going in. We're ready.]

The cave's mouth was massive. It was carved to look like a literal mouth - eyes and a snout included, with sharp, intimidating fangs. It may have stirred fear in some, but the only emotion I felt was one of paralyzing, giddy excitement. It was all I could do to continue



moving forward.

Nova wrung his tail between his paws. [A-alright.]

[We'll be okay.] Myst smiled.

Nova gave her an apprehensive look. [H-how do you know?]

[Because you'll protect me.] she grinned, nuzzling his snout with her own.

[Alright! What are we waiting for?] Static motioned towards the entrance.

[Follow Josh with care. A dark aura surrounds this place...] Mew frowned, still strapped to my wrist.

[I also feel uneasy, Josh.] Skarr frowned. [Is it wise to release us here? I, for one, won't be much use on my feet.]

[I imagine the cave will open up more, once we're inside.] I answered.

Skarr nodded. [Mmmm.]

I took my first step into the Cave. Our footsteps echoed loudly, like we were a small but invincible army. [Through our trials, we were tested. Through our journey, we were made into a team. We were forged together. I couldn't ask for a better friends.]

[D'awwww.] Skarr smiled. Myst elbowed him hard beneath the wing, and he winced. Our footsteps seemed smaller somehow.

[I'm serious. I know, as long as we stick together, we'll never-] Suddenly, the cave was pitch black. [Nova? A little help here?]

Silence.

[Nova? Static? Skarr? Myst?  
Hello?]

Nothing.

"Anyone?"

"...Anyone...?" The Cave echoed back, mockingly.

[I'm still here.] Mew responded. I breathed a quick sigh of relief, and shoved my hand in my pocket, holding on tightly to the watch. [But I don't feel the presence of the others anymore, Josh.]

I leaned against the wall, waiting for the flurry of thoughts in my mind die down. [W-we'll find each other. Whatever trick or test this is, we'll pass.]

[Through hell and back again.] Mew nodded.

[Where do you know that from?]

[I don't.] Mew giggled. [You do.]

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

[As long as we stick together, we'll never-]

Silence. Sickening, horrifying, silence.

[Josh!] I screamed, whirling around with my tiny light, trying to catch sight of my trainer. My wing clipped a stalagmite, and I winced. [Myst!]

[...Anyone...?]

26. Remember me?

(Skarr POV)

[As long as we stick together, we'll never-]

Gone. Gone like time; precious moments slipping out of your control.

I whirled around, but met only blackness. Without Nova's light, I was blind. I called out, but silence was the only reply.

"Anyone?" I gulped, pleading I wasn't as alone as I felt.

"It's been awhile, Sky-Sky." An entity purred from within the dark. I felt nauseous hearing that voice, and the nickname I had struggled for so long to forget.

I growled, swirling around trying to find the source of the voice.  
"Where are you?"

"Where do you want me to be?" came her sultry reply.

"Gone!" I charged where I thought she might be, and swung a sharpened wing at the voice, but hit nothing.

"So much \_spite, \_Sky-Sky."

"You broke my heart, you uncontrolled siren!" I swiped again, but missed.

"Siren? Oh, how your words wound me!"

I lunged again, and my wing finally hit flesh. I drove my wing tip further, and plunged my wing deep inside my foe.

"If you wanted to penetrate me, you could've just asked."

"Get off me, you pervert!" I screamed, trying to wrench my wing free. She pulled it further in, and enveloped me in warm goo.

"What ever happened to us, Sky-Sky? There was a time you would beg me never to stop, and now you just want me gone. What happened between

us?"

She was up to my neck, nearly drowning me in her liquid form. "I saw you for the monster you were, Ditto."

She laughed, a horrible, gruesome laugh. "Monster? I simply aim to please. I am a mirror. Is it my fault when I reflected you, you were shown your true colors?"

"I just wanted to be loved!" I struggled against her hold.

"And I just wanted to be your lover. Why do you fight me, Sky-Sky?"

"Because those aren't the same!" I broke her hold, and slashed her with my poisoned, winged blades. "I craved love, and you craved lust. When I could no longer sate you, you tossed me aside for another! You never even cared!"

"I cared." I felt something crash against my skull â€" something hard, and metal. "I cared about myself."

I winced in pain, and readied myself. "A battle? You knew you could never best me! And poisoned, no less!"

"You can't poison me, Sky-Sky." I slashed at the source of the sound, but my wing collided against a hauntingly similar metal wing. "Didn't your trainer teach you that?"

"You're sick!"

"You don't need to agree with me, Sky-Sky. In fact, you don't even need to be conscious."

Another strike came from behind me, and collided with the base of my skull. I winced, and prepared myself for battle.

"It won't be as fun with you knocked out, of course." Ditto's sickening laugh echoed through the Cave. "But I've had worseâ€"!"

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

[Hello? Anyone?]

\_Stay calm, Nova. You can do this. Find the others; they'll know what to do.\_

With my paws in a death grip around my tail, I hobbled further into the Cave. It was terrifying. Echoes of other \_things \_reverberated through the Cave igniting my imagination with all the horrifying ways I knew I was about to die.

[Helloâ€"!?]

Blindness would be better than the meager light that I had. At least with no light, I didn't have to see the monster kill me. I would have blessed ignorance right up to the point the monster's jaws were upon me, instead of seeing the monster a moment before it got me. Maybe it

would taunt me. Come into and out of the light for a while, just enough so I knew it was there, like toying with its prey. Then, only when I had lost all hope-

[Myst?] I blinked.

A Zoroark whirled around with fright, then faded from existence.

[Wait, Myst! It's me, Nova! You're alright! You don't have to hide!]

"Nova?" An unfamiliar voice echoed.

[M-Myst? Is that you?]

"Yesâ€|" The Zoroark stepped out of its illusion, and stared at me with piercing blue eyes. Suddenly I felt hazy, almost if I was in a dream. Everything felt so surreal.

"Whyâ€|why are your eyes blue?" I asked, almost in slow motion.

"What color should they be?"

"Red. Your eyes are red, Myst."

"Then they'll be red." And the Zoroark's eyes turned red, to match Myst's.

"Like carved rubiesâ€|" I mumbled.

"Tell me more about me." The Zoroark implored.

"You'reâ€|beautiful, and fun. Smart, andâ€|powerful. Brave, in a way I can never be."

The Zoroark nuzzled against my neck. "We have history, I see."

"You're loyalâ€|"

"Yes, that was always a fault of mine." The Zoroark ran a paw through my coat. "Do you know where I would be, if I wouldn't be here?"

"Noâ€|" I whispered. "I was looking for you."

"Let's go find me, alright Nova?"

"Okayâ€|"

\* \* \*

><p>(Myst POV)<p>

The darkness was no issue for me, of course. The more annoying element was Nova's light. In complete darkness, I can see fine. Unfortunately, it doesn't work well in moderate darkness. Nova's light was distracting, and nearly blinded me when he walked in

front.

[As long as we stick together, we'll never-]

How ironic that the second that distraction was gone, I would miss it more than the world.

[Nova!] I called out sharply. [Josh! Static! Skarr!]

No reply.

"Clever!" I shouted out angrily to the stalactites above me. "Divide us, is that your plan? Show yourself, you coward!"

The slow sound of dripping water was my only reply.

"Bastard!" I screamed.

Silence.

I ran deeper into the cave, with my illusions cloaking me like a second skin. My team needed me.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

"Hey Mew?" I spoke aloud.

[Mmm?]

"Do you think it's odd that we haven't run into any wild Pok  mon? I mean, I've heard stories of trainers' entire teams getting whipped out by incredibly strong Pok  mon. Doesn't it strike you as odd that there hasn't been a single one?"

[No.]

"Why not?"

[Because there's something else here  ]

My flashlight was dim, but it was effective enough. I stuck to the left wall    the only sure way to avoid getting lost.

"What do you mean, something else?"

[You felt it too, didn't you? The aura. Something powerful lurks here.]

[\*\*Some\*\*\*\*\_thing? \_\*\*\*\*You insult me, Creation.\*\*]

I felt my spine shatter. My ribs collapsed in on themselves, piercing the organs underneath. I crumbled to the floor, my body broken.

I tasted blood.

[Release him at once!] Mew took his original form, and screamed into the blackness.

This voice didn't roar. This voice didn't scream, or shout. It was calculating. It was precise. **[\*\*You don't know the destruction this human nearly caused, and the destruction he is destined to create.\*\*]**

And it was immeasurably powerful.

[You're wrong!]

**[\*\*And what do you know, Nine hundred and seventeen?\*\*]**

\_Nine hundred and seventeenâ€|why is that number significantâ€|?\_

[I know you are not a murderer.]

**[\*\*You mistake my artificial soul for one which has compassion.\*\*]**

\_I am dyingâ€|\_

[What has this human done to deserve death, brother?]

**[\*\*After his time masquerading as Darkrai's apprentice, tensions were arisen with the human leaders. The Ancients attacking humans is, as you know, against the treaty. It took several days to convince them of this trainer's carelessness incompetence.\*\*]**

[Hardly Josh's fault! Tensions were arisen because of Darkrai's previous actions-]

**[\*\*Awww. You named him.\*\*]**

[W-what?]

**[\*\*Josh. You named your human. Adorable.\*\*]**

[They were on edge because of Darkrai's previous transgressions! He could've have known about the fragile state of the treaty. He is ignorant of all of the Ancestor's communications!]

**[\*\*As you are ignorant of his knowledge, newborn.\*\*]**

[Stop addressing me as such!]

**[\*\*Then stop being so naive.\*\*]**

The being stepped out of the shadows, wielding psychic energy at the end of his orbed fingers. Unlike Mew, you could tell by the voice this creature was unmistakably male.

Mewtwo. The leader of the Ancients, and the one who stopped the Great War.

**[\*\*I see the future, newborn. I see continents burning with the human's atomic hellfire. I see humans and PokÃ©mon alike oblivious up to the point of their obliteration. Billions of souls whipped out in the blink of our cosmic eye. And I see the single soul responsible.\*\*]** Mewtwo's gaze fell upon me.

[The treaty isn't so weak as to have one accident trigger a world

war!]

[\*\*Do not act as if you remember all the intricacies of the Treaty, newborn. You don't remember anything from that day, do you?\*\*]

[I remember dying for you.] Mew spat.

Mewtwo cocked his head with interest. [You remember. Then you know why this human must die.]

Mew shone with light, coming within inches of Mewtwo's face. [Josh is not responsible for the end of the world, brother. I see more than you know. I recall eons before your creation. I recall when I was a mere \_idea\_ in the mind of Arceus! Before the fate of the world rested on your mind, I was the protector of this fragile marble floating in space!]

[\*\*See then, brother! See the future. You know my actions here determine the fate of the world. You know I must kill him, to prevent-\*\*]

[Killing him is what sets the events in motion! He is the catalyst! His death is what triggers the investigation! The prosecution! The trap the humans set in motion, that you see coming from light-years away. Your retaliation, and then the war! It all starts here, right now!]

[\*\*Your mind is clouded with your feelings for this  
\*\*\*\*\_human.\_\*\*\*\*]\*\*

[And yours is clouded with hate!]

\*\*[My interpretation of future events demands that I kill this one. Yours demands that you save it.]\*\*

[So it would appear.]

Mewtwo smiled a tired, knowing smile. [\*\*Last time we fought, things did not end well for you.\*\*]

[I will fight you until my last breath, then I will return to resume.]

[\*\*How many times did I kill you?\*\*]

[Three hundred and ninety-two.] Mew spat.

[\*\*You are very resilient.\*\*]

[You are very \_mortal. \_I do not have such restrictions.]

[\*\*My mortality was the cost of having as much power as I possess. You are a slow, ever burning fire. I am an inferno " short lived, but fierce, and unforgiving.\*\*] Mewtwo turned to face me again.

[You risk my wrath once more, \_brother?\_]

[\*\*No.\*\*] Mewtwo turned from me, and gave Mew a haunting smile. [\*\*No. Proving this human's ill intentions will be far simpler then killing you another three hundred and ninety-two times, dear

brotherâ€|\*\*]

\* \* \*

><p>(Myst POV)<p>

I was being watched. I felt it in my fur, the way it raised uneasily on my spine. I turned around slowly, feeling naked despite my illusion.

She made a mistake though. Light is almost impossible to mask, and in absolute darkness it shone like a torch.

"Par'thuanji." the sociopath scoffed. "It's been too long."

"Good to see you've been well, Ethpa." I growled. "How's the old tribe?"

"Well enough without me, I'm sorry to say. Something about treason, and my questionable morality of sending you on your free cruise trip."

"Oh yes. Well, the bag wasn't too hard to chew myself out of. The real bitch was the drugs. You must've been a talented chief for me not to taste them"

"My own special blend, of course. Nasty side effects, though. You haven't had any muscle weakness, have you?"

I froze.

"Don't worry. Typically side effects don't develop unless you've taken a lot of this particular poison. You would've had to start taking it since birth. Plus, you would have a list of other symptoms, like nausea, reddening of the eyesâ€|"

"You fed me poison as a \_cub\_?" I threw off my illusion to glare at her with my poisoned, scarlet eyes. "What vendetta could you possibly have against a newborn!?"

"Your lineage was a danger to my leadership." The glowing light came closer, and I readied myself to attack. "I would've killed you outright, but I was already under scrutiny from the others. I thought a slower working poison would be best, but I underestimated the dose. Still though, knowing my foe has an obvious weakness is better than-

I charged at the light. Ethpa's illusion was shattered, and she barely managed to jump out of the way. Nova stood next to her, eyes glazed with compliance.

"Nova?" I blinked, momentarily distracted. Ethpa smashed her foot into my chest, sending me crashing against the cave floor. "Augh!"

"Go on, get up." Ethpa taunted. I growled at her from the cave floor, struggling to contact and sit up in the way I always knew I never could. "Hah. You look so adorably pitiful. I'll come by later to kill you, but I'll start with killing your friends first. Maybe I'll even use your boy-toy here to help me. Isn't that right, Nova?" Ethpa



stroked Nova's chin with a cruel claw.

"Don't touch him!"

"Oh? I don't think you're in a position to order me around, Par'thu. Why don't you just beg Nova to remember? Recall all the good times you've had together?"

"And you wonder why the tribe abandoned you." I spat.

"See, now that hurts. Fine, if you insist, I'll just get started." Ethpa frowned, her ice blue eyes flashing red. "Nova, dear? Besides me, whom do you care for most in our little group?"

"Josh." Nova droned soullessly. "He saved meâ€|cares for meâ€|"

"Good. Now we have a starting point." Ethpa purred, strolling away, taking my light with her.

\* \* \*

><p>(Static POV)<p>

A light. It was faint, but it was there. I ran up to it, entranced by its odd, alien beauty. I was scared I'd be trapped in the dark forever.

I could finally see my paws, though they were grey in the scarce light. I found a chamber that opened up into the night sky. A sea of stars, and just the hint of a new moon.

It had been so long, since that night I bobbed in the sea. The night I fought with Overdose, and the night he broke my muzzle. The night I cried into merciless sand, and the night I made peace with Death.

It felt strange, looking at the same stars, the same moon. I felt calm, tranquil. As if everything would be okay, in the end.

Is this what Josh sees when he looks at the stars?

"Hello, Static."

My blood chilled in my veins, and I felt my heart nearly stop in my chest. Of course it would be him. Waiting to get me alone, to finish what he started. Just as quickly as it chilled, my blood ignited hot, hotter than I had ever felt before. I wasn't scared. I wasn't upset, or sad, or reminiscent.

I was angry.

And I refused to be Overdose's victim.

Before he could blink, my foot was colliding with the side of his skull. He reeled back far too slowly, opening himself up for a punch to the gut. I hurled him against the wall, and sent every bolt of electricity into him I had.

"What are you doing here!?" I demanded, smashing him into the wall again.

"Take your time!" he groaned, staring at me with tired, emerald eyes. Emeralds that had been smashed and placed back together in a way that took out their sheen, and stole the light they should have refracted. Dark emeralds, shattered and worn.

"Why aren't you fighting back? Why are you letting me win?" My voice shook with insecurity as I slammed him into the wall once more.

"Because you deserve this. Do whatever you will with me " I won't resist."

I tossed him to the ground, confused and disoriented. "What are you doing, Overdose? Shouldn't you be at some mental hospital somewhere!?"

"Oxygen."

"What?"

He panted, pushing himself off the ground. "My name is Oxygen now. I changed it."

He was bruised, and bleeding. He wasn't taking damage like he should've been. I was hurting him.

I didn't trust him, but deep down, I felt bad for hurting him. "Why'd you change your name?"

He laughed a little, and sat on the ground. "I was at the hospital awhile, Sniv. Humans " they hook you up to stuff. They tell you numbers and statistics about you, you know?"

"Yeah, Josh does the same thing. Except with attacks, and math stuff."

Overdose nodded. "Yeah, exactly, except with doctors it's stuff that's \_inside \_you. Blood and organs and stuff. They helped me but I hated them, except for this one nurse!" His eyes glazed, and he stared at the floor. "She was beautiful. She helped me."

I frowned suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

His emerald eyes spilled over into his muzzle, coating a scar, and dribbling off his cheek. "One of the others told me I could off myself by blowing bubbles into my I.V. " the little thing that humans use to put healing stuff in your blood."

"Off yourself?"

"You know." Overdose made a motion with his hand, like flicking off a light. "Forever."

"What happened?"

"She stopped me. I yelled, I cried, I told her how I was completely evil and horrible and how I deserved to die, but!" Overdose smiled weakly.

"She saved you?"

"She said that I couldn't be completely evil." Overdose stared longingly at the moonlit floor. "Over half of me is water."

I smiled, despite myself. It was too absurd. "What?"

"Then, she told me to take a deep breath, because some of me is air, too." Overdose smiled. "I can't be completely \_anything. \_I'm made up of a million tiny things â€" blood, iron, waterâ€"oxygen. Ever since, I kept the name. Itâ€"keeps me sane. Reminds me that I'm not who I was, andâ€"there's always something good inside me." He smiled weakly. "Even if it is just air."

"How did you get here?"

"Honestly, I wanted to find you." He shrugged, collapsing on the smooth, rock floor, and placing a paw behind his head. "I was released from the MeadowCenter Facilities just a few days ago. Today I felt something want to pull me here. It said I would find you. I didn't resist."

"Why did you want to find me?"

Overdose covered his face. "I don't know. So you could kill me? So you could get your revenge? So we could be even, and you could know I'm never going to hurt you again? So you could end the monster I-"

"I forgive you."

Oxygen turned to me and blinked, then gave a little laugh. "What?"

"I forgive you. That's why you came, isn't it?"

"You don't have to trick me to kill me." Oxygen spread his arms wide. "I'm not going to fight it. Two weeks, and my doses wear off, forever. Two weeks, and I begin to heal from what I put my body through. I'm effected like humans until then. Every punch hits me. You can kill me with your attacks."

"I don't want to kill you."

"Yes you do. You have to. You want revenge just like everyone else."

"You don't know me." I smirked, offering him a paw.

Oxygen shook his head. "What I didâ€"you can't forgive that."

"I choose to forgive it anyway."

"Snivâ€" "

"Static. Call me Static."

I had never seen him cry before. It was weird. I dreamed about killing this guy, shoving my paw though his skull, or kicking him off a cliff. Ending him, forever. Butâ€"it wasn't right. I saw something

better in him now; a broken soul seeking redemption.

Who was I to take that away?

Oxygen took my paw, and he stood up. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Help me find my trainer." I nodded at the darkness. "We'll get out of here together."

\* \* \*

><p>(Myst POV)<p>

It was interesting having a new vantage point in my prone, helpless state. Now that I had a larger neck, I could tilt it, and watch as my stomach disobeyed my instructions to contract, \_just a little, \_so I could stop lying on my back like a newborn.

\_Get up. Get up! GET UP!\_

"Damn you, Ethpa!" I growled, smashing my fist against the cave floor. Yet, through my rage, a single coherent thought bubbled up.

\_I have hands.\_

\_I can touch the floor with my right hand.\_

\_I can roll over.\_

\*\*\_I can roll over.\_\*\*

I pushed off with my right claw, and rolled onto my stomach. My legs instinctively kicked at just the right moment, and I sprung to standing.

\_I did it.\_

\_My weakness no longer hinders me.\_

\_Time to save the rest, and repay Ethpa for all the kindness she's shown me.\_

Silent as a shadow I dashed forward, cloaked in the caring hands of my illusions.

\* \* \*

><p>The feeling of my foot colliding against the back of her head was delightful, but what was better was the sound. Not only did it <em>thwack</em> appropriately, but it reverberated over and over, boasting my success throughout the cavern.

"Argh!" Ethpa screamed, flying forward and crashing onto the ground. Her illusion vanished around her, leaving a dopey looking Nova standing to her side. "\_Nice. \_Good to know you still have the honor of attacking your foe's \_back.\_"

"Honor is a tool created by the twisted to gain an advantage on the

foolish." I smirked.

"A protÃ©gÃ© after my own heart." She grinned a tired grin, and flicked her wrist. "Nova, would you do the honors of finishing this little impostor?"

"Okayâ€¦" Nova turned to me, his claws phasing to shimmering rainbow. He looked adorable as always, even in his brainwashed, vacant-eyed form.

His first strike went wide, and I was able to duck under it and press myself against his chest.

"Death wish much?" Ethpa cackled as Nova glared, and attempted to gut me with both claws.

I kissed him hard, harder than I ever had before. It was easier now â€" other times I felt inadequate or off-put at the concept of such outward displays of affection. It was most likely due to the circumstances, mostly both of our lives in danger \_and \_the fact he most likely wouldn't remember this. In time I would come clean, of course, but for now I enjoyed my secrets.

His tongue was confused, but warm. Wet, in the best, most desirable way.

"You plan to win him back through romance? You're adorable." Ethpa purred.

"No, I'm just brainwashing him deeper than you are." I smirked, digging into his vacant eyes with my own, and pouring my will into his soul.

"What!? You can't overcome my enchantment! And you risk hurting your lover!"

"I believe in him." I pressed the tip of my forehead to his own, sealing the pact. "Nova, dear, do you mind finishing off my dear friend Ethpa here?"

"Of course." Nova nodded slowly, brandishing his multicolored claws.

"Nova! It's me, Myst! Your partner!" Ethpa squealed, backing away.

"You're no partner of mine." Nova roared, releasing a torrent of flame from his jaws. Ethpa collapsed on the floor, next to a partially melted stalagmite.

I wrapped my arms lazily around his neck, and smirked. Ah, if only I could do this when he was arguably conscious.

Nova wobbled slightly, and I released him.

"â€¦I don't feel good." Nova sighed, eyes half closed.

"Bear with me one moment longer, love. It'll be over soon." I smiled at the word 'love'. Had I ever used it before?

I strutted over to Ethpa, who was out cold. I opened her eyes with a paw, and stared deeply into them, forcing my will over her own.

'You found me, and killed me.' I forced the thought into her mind. 'There was no one else here. Your bloodlust is now gone. You wish to start a new tribe, elsewhere, where you will not be the leader.' I smiled to myself.

"Myst?"

"Coming." I stood up, and walked over to Nova.

"I don't like this place!" He frowned, gazing half-heartedly at the stone.

"We can leave." I nodded.

"...Can you fix me?"

His little squeaky voice broke my heart. "Absolutely. Let's just get out of here first, okay?"

"Okay!"

## 27. Tales told of this day

(Skarr POV)

"Never!" I thought you could match my endurance! Sky-Sky!" Ditto wheezed, holding her side with a wing. "Why don't you attack!? Why don't you strike me? Why don't you get what you desire?"

I stood immaculately at full health, daring her to strike me again. "You never could stand against me."

"I am you! I'm an exact copy!" She Struggled against me again, smashing her wing badly against my exterior. "Exact! Your power, your ferocity!" She struggled once more, crunching her neck at an odd angle. "Everything!" She panted, trying to stay conscious.

"Not my patience." I smashed her with my wing, and she landed unconscious on the floor, melding back into her original form in a puddle of pink flab. "You could take my form, but I don't think you knew anything about me. Maybe you're right, and maybe I'm too slow to act upon my own interests, but it is a vice far too etched in steel to-

"Skarr!" Someone shouted in the cave. I whirled around to see Nova waving happily, crushing me with a hug. "Oh! I was so scared! Do you know where Josh is?" Myst stood behind him happily, her tail flicking back and forth.

"Nova." I blinked. "No, um, I don't. I was separated, and found an old foe."

Myst grinned. "So did we. Love and friendship prevails, and all of that."

"Hardly." I scoffed. "I'm just made for defense, so stalling her

out-

"Yes, yes!" Myst waved me off. "We need to find the others! If this cave is testing us by bringing our foes, we need to help Josh and Static!"

"And Mew." Nova whispered quietly. "What monsters do you think lurk in his past?"

\* \* \*

><p><p>

(Josh POV)

[In that timeline he doesn't even possess the ability of telekinesis!]

[\*\*He would gain it from under the tutelage of Darkrai, during his hospital stay after he underwent a near lethal exposure of the poison.\*\*]

[That doesn't explain the poison's occurrence in the first place â€" Josh wasn't poisoned, so that entire timeline is rendered moot!] Mew shouted, waving his arms accusatorily at the hanging lines in the air, each describing different, conflicting events through space-time.

'Why haven't I died yet?' I wondered hazily, watching the blood drain from my body. Ironically, nothing actually hurt, it just felt numb and terribly wrong. Like the second you hear your bone snap, but before you feel it, or the second you see the bone protrude from the skin, but don't quite feel the horrendous pain.

\*\*[Incorrect.]\*\* Mewtwo moved two of the strands apart. \*\*[The timeline will resurge now, with this human, unless he is stopped.]\*\*

[You are causing the resurgence of the timeline by interfering with this one! By killing Josh, you are guaranteeing this timeline's intersection!]

[\*\*You misunderstand-]\*\*

\*\*[\*\*\_No!\_You misunderstand! Your events here, right now, will cause absolute devastation, not to mention the death of this innocent human.]

Mewtwo scowled. [\*\*No human, anywhere, is innocent.\*\*]

I could move my hand, and my shoulder. My arm was fractured terribly, but I could still move three of my fingers on my right hand, thumb included. I winced, pushing my hand down my side.

Mew's eyes began to glow. [Your hatred threatens this world, Mewtwo.]

[\*\*Your love for this being is what threatens the world.\*\* \*\*Make no mistake Mew,] \*\*Mewtwo thrust out his palm, and captured Mew in a transparent blue orb. [\*\*You cannot stop me. I can only attempt to

make you understand.])\*\*

[You bastard!]Mew screamed, smashing his fists against the mental prison. [You'll die! You'll die before you'll see the destruction you are destined to cause!]

[\*\*Are so committed to your logical fallacies that you would murder me, Brother?]\*\*]

[You would kill this innocent human before even letting him speak!]

Mewtwo sighed, and pointed a finger at me. [\*\*Speak, then\*\*.]

I cleared my throat, wincing as some blood made itself up as well. "I don't intend on causing any harm-"

Mewtwo silenced me with a flick of his wrist. [\*\*[This is absurd. Humans lie, constantly. We can't derive the truth from this.]]\*\*

"You want the truth, Mewtwo?" I wheezed, glaring at him from the floor. He turned to me, with an amused expression. "I think we're a lot alike. We've both accomplished a lot, though-" I coughed again, and more blood spilled from my lips. "-though yours is obviously more important, wars and all. I came from a home where I wasn't really supported, and you came fromâ€¦well, not the best starting place either."

[\*\*Tortured and mutilated to life by humans, yes, I recall.】\*\*]

"Yet despite this, you choose to do good. You ended the war. You helped bring peace between PokÃ©mon and humans, a peace that has lasted over forty years."

[\*\*I was forced into making the treaty by humans. Your race simply killed without discrimination. You didn't care who you hit, as long as you hit them hard. Ecosystems destroyed, billions killed. It was so terrible I had no choice but to relent.\*\*]

"Boundless good, stopping a terrible war, and boundless evil, killing thousands and reducing cities to ash."

[\*\*What is your point, human?]\*\*]

"You do what you see as necessary, and I respect that."

[\*\*You think you can win me over with flattery?]\*\*]

"No. I think I'll win you over by doing something equally necessary." I grabbed the Masterball off my belt and smashed it onto the floor, unlocking the nightmare within.

\* \* \*

><p>(Myst POV)<p>

"It's Static!"

"Andâ€¦is that Overdose?"



"I can't tell; he's too far away."

"It's definitely a Raichu! I think."

I squinted, my illusion masking our presence in the darkness of the Cave. Per my instruction, Nova had attempted to dim his tail. To my surprise, he was moderately successful, and hid most of the excess light in his wings.

"That's definitely Overdose." I confirmed.

"What do we do?" Nova whispered.

"And why is Static \_willingly \_traveling with him?" Skarr noticed.

"He must be under a compulsion, like you were, Nova." I nodded.

"Let's hit Overdose hard and fast. He has a lot of experience on us, but if we do this correctly we can get a hit on him before he knows what's happening. Ready?"

"Absolutely!" Skarr nodded, and we all charged at once.

(Static POV)

"Now, at first I was all 'No, plays are stupid, why would we ever want to do that', right?"

"Yeah, it just seems kind of dumb. Why not watch a movie?" Oxygen nodded sympathetically.

"Exactly! But Josh was all poetic and whiny about it, so we tried out and actually got pretty good roles. And it was! oddly fun. Pretending to be someone else, and having their-"

"Urk!" Oxygen suddenly cried, flying backwards and skidding against the cave floor. Something invisible slammed against his side, and he went spiraling into the air.

"Wait, guys! He's with me!" I yelped, waving madly. Oxygen stopped moving, and just hovered oddly in the air.

"Nova! Static's under a compulsion, remember? You don't \_listen \_to him!" Myst's voice hissed.

"Oops, sorry." Nova's apologetic voice echoed behind Oxygen. Oxygen stopped hovering and fell to the floor ungracefully.

"Stop! He's not the enemy!" I raced towards overdose, and shielded him with my paws. "Seriously! Stop attacking!"

Myst materialized out of thin air. "Static, you're obviously brainwashed-"

"\_You're\_ brainwashed!" I retorted.

In retrospect, it wasn't the most well thought out comeback.

Myst groaned. "Static, move aside."

"No! I won't let you hurt him!"

"Static." Oxygen winced, pushing himself up. "They won't believe you. Let me talk to them."

I gave him a skeptical look, but allowed him to stand and walk over to Myst.

"Sorry, I don't believe we've met." Oxygen bowed, more than a bit awkwardly.

"The pleasure's mine." Myst rolled her eyes. "Remind me why we're not at your throat?"

"And that's why I choose the name Oxygen. It keeps me anchored, when things get too much."

"Wow." Nova hugged the scared Raichu. "I had no idea. I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. You didn't do anything wrong; I was a monster back then, and you were just trying to protect your friend. I'm just trying to make up for my past. As much as I can, anyway."

"I think you're full of shit." Myst spat.

Oxygen shrugged. "I mean, I wouldn't believe me either, but I am telling the truth."

"Hmmm." Myst snorted, tossing her hair back.

"In any case, we can talk \_while\_ looking for your trainer. If you still want to stab me in the back, we can do that while walk-" An explosion interrupted him, shaking the cave itself and making stalactites crumble from the ceiling.

"That way!" I shouted, and Myst cloaked us in illusion as we raced forward towards the source.

\* \* \*

><p><p>

(Josh POV)

\*\*[\_Well, \_\_ well, \_\_wellâ€|. \_]\*\*Darkrai cackled, appearing out of spiraling blackness. [\*\*\_Oh, how good it feels to \_feel. \_To exist. To \_be.\_]\*\*]

[\*\*Foolish human!] \*\*Mewtwo screamed, throwing a ball of prismatic energy at the black aberration. [\*\*What have you done!?!]\*\*]

Darkrai took the full force of the hit, grinned. [\*\*\_A battle of the ancients, Mewtwo. No limits, and no restrictions. Take it in. embrace it.\_\*\*] Darkrai took a deep breath, and shadows enveloped the room, save for two glowing, red eyes. [\*\*\_You know what being in that pokeball felt like? The status, the dreamless state?]\*\*]

[\*\*I command you to die!\*\*] Mewtwo threw another ball of energy, missing terribly and obliterating a stalactite on the floor.

[\*\*\_It felt like \_nothing\_. Just like your mind, Mewtwo. When I was just an idea, lurking inside your conscious mind. When I was but a nightmare of your tortured soul!\_\*\*]

[Josh!] a female voice shook my consciousness. I turned to see the air shimmer behind me, just a vague hint at what lay beneath. [We're here!]

[All of you?]

[Yeah! What can we do?]

\_We can still make it out of this. We're together. We can still live.\_

[Stay hidden. Wait until you see an opening, then take it.] I nodded.

[\*\*\_I have the humans to thank for consciousness,\_\*\*] Darkrai continued. [\*\*\_The way they tore us apart, mind from host, but I have you to thank for that spark, Mewtwo. I am your fear, your pain, and suffering, and I will be your End.\_\*\*]

[\*\*Die, spirit!\*\*] Mewtwo thrust another ball of orange energy, lighting up the darkness and smashing a whole in the wall. Darkrai cackled as the shadows swirled faster on the walls, reaching out and badly slicing the once grand Ancient. [\*\*You're nothing more than a ghost of my might!\*\*]

\*\*\_[I'm much more than a ghost Mewtwo, and you're about to see just how real I am.]\_\*\* Darkrai appeared out of one of the walls and smashed Mewtwo with a wave of black energy, sending him flying in the air. Mewtwo retaliated by throwing another orange ball, just as Darkrai went in for the kill. The ball smashed straight inside Darkrai's chest and exploded outward, obliterating him and causing a massive crater in the ground itself.

\*\*[â€|I did it.]\*\* Mewtwo blinked at his hands with bewilderment. \*\*[Îâ€|I killed Darkrai.]\*\*

[And I have the honor of knocking out an ancient.] Myst grinned a massive smile, and decked the back of Mewtwo's head.

[\*\*I commend you for actually connecting the hit,] \*\*Mewtwo winced, levitated Myst in front of him with a bluish black aura\*\*. [But I always assumed your race was more â€|\_intelligent\_â€|then dictated by your previous actions.] \*\*

[Don't just hold me here!] Myst growled, struggling against his telekinetic hold. [If you're going to hurt me, then \_hurt me! \_Do it, your miserable excuse for a functioning Mew!]

[\*\*If you insist.\*\*] Mewtwo flicked his wrist, and Myst screamed as an illusion dug its way \_out \_of her flesh and disappeared into the air. With another careless gesture, her body slammed against the cave wall, and slumped to the floor.

[Myst!] Nova cried, hiding behind a stalagmite.

[\*\*How many must be harmed in the futile attempt to save this human?\*\*] Mewtwo sneered, trapping Nova in a field of energy. Suddenly, a blur of chrome sliced at Mewtwo's side, cutting a deep purple scar into already bruised, bleeding flesh. Mewtwo roared and blindly tossed a sphere of dark orange, crashing into the blur of steel and causing it to crumble to ground.

[Skarr!] Nova cried. His eyes shone white with anger, and he sliced through the telekinetic barrier, tackling Mewtwo with his rage. Skarr slowly pushed himself to standing, wincing as smoke trailed off his wings.

I felt better. With every strike Nova made, my bones didn't feel as fragile, and my insides stabilized.

\_Am Iâ€|am I alright?\_

Static dove in, forgetting all the lessons and training we had done so long in favor of simply biting Mewtwo's tail as hard as he could, and pouring every ounce of electricity he had into the Ancient. A Raichu came out of \_somewhere \_and bashed into him with a Volt Tackle, allowing Nova to gain leverage and slice Mewtwo badly across the face. Mew finally disintegrated the telekinetic sphere around him, and fell to the floor eager to join in the fight.

[\*\*Insolence!\*\*] Mewtwo boomed, grabbing the Raichu by its tail with a telekinetic fist, and swirling it around like a mace. He smashed the Raichu into Nova and Static, knocking them both backward and disorienting them. He then swung the Raichu even faster, and with sickening wet tearing sound, his tail tore off, and his body was flung against the wall.

[Everyone! Stop attacking separately! Combine your strongest attacks and hit him all at once!]

[Gladly.] Mew growled, the sound of an old vendetta burning within his ageless voice.

[Not you.] I ordered, and conveyed an entirely different set of instructions.

Mew blinked, shocked. [Iâ€|I did not consider that possibility.]

[That's why we're a team. Now, go!]

"Cha!" Static exclaimed, lightning streaking out of his cheeks. At the same time, the lights dimmed as the Raichu sucked in a deep breath and blasted out a brilliant beam of white. Skarr dove at Mewtwo with all the speed he could muster, and Nova let lose a torrent of fire. Mewtwo threw up a telekinetic shield at the last moment, but it began to crack and splinter with the force of the combined attacks.

[\*\*ENOUGH!\*\*] Mewtwo screamed, exploding the barrier outward. With a bloody palm, he motioned towards Nova and choked him with a fierce mental grip, and thrust him at Skarr, knocking them both out. He grabbed Overdose â€" \_What is \_OVERDOSE \_doing here!? â€" \_and squeezed him like a tube of toothpaste, causing blood to spray out of

the base of his torn tail, and bashed him against Static, leaving them both unconscious.

Mewtwo turned to me. I was standing, but barely. My nose bled freely, a result of my pathetic human will making an attempt at freedom against the strongest mind the universe has ever known.

[\*\*There will be tales told of this day\*\*.] He growled in a raspy tone. [\*\*The day that, despite all odds, despite all the horrors and evils this world has inflicted upon me, I managed to save it. How I killed you, Darkrai, and all of your followers, singlehandedly. How you all died, alone and broken, and how all your efforts failed.\*\*]

[All his efforts but one.] Darkrai cackled musically, appearing from my shadow and giving Mewtwo a quirky, terrifying smile.

\* \* \*

><p><p>

[\*\*\_What!?!\_\*\*] Mewtwo cried, instantly summoning another orange sphere. The sphere flickered and faded from view, and Mewtwo blinked, unprepared and bewildered.

[It would be a shame if you were out of Focus Blasts, and had to resort to fighting me with your mind. Or, your fists rather. Those would be more effective.]

[\*\*M-Mew!? You took on Darkrai's form?\*\*) Mewtwo backed against the wall, his eyes growing wide. Cuts and bruises adorned his muscular frame, and he looked weary, weakened, and terrified.

[You fear Darkrai more than me. How intriguing.] Mew let a streak of darkness, tearing at Mewtwo's core.

[\*\*Aaaaugh!\*\*] He recoiled, clutching his chest. [\*\*N-no! Not like this!\*\*]

[Three hundred,] The Mew-Darkrai smiled cruelly, letting out another blast of black. [And ninety two times, you killed me. You struck me down. Do you know how exhausting it is to die, over and over again? Important details obliterated, memories lost to the relentless tides of time?]

[P-please.] Mewtwo begged, all the strength leaving his voice.

[My only regret is that you can only die \_once. \_You can never know my pain, but you will know Death. Everlasting, endless darkness.] Mew grabbed Mewtwo in a pitch black aura, slowly draining the life out of the once near-invulnerable Ancient. Mewtwo went under, and slowly, his life began to wane.

"Stop."

The Darkrai turned to me, and gave me a queer expression. [What?]

"Transform back, and stop it." I ordered. "We've won. It's over."

The Darkrai levitated over to me, piercing me with its dark, hollow red eyes. [You will not halt my vengeance. Justice shall be wrought from the blood of my adversary.]

"From the blood of your brother."

The Darkrai stopped for a moment, and his eyes flickering blue. [T-that is irrelevant-]

"Born from your DNA, the only copy of you you may ever have."

[H-heâ€¦] The Darkrai doubled over and melded into pink fur, then hugged me fiercely. [N-no! He deserves to die! He couldn't listen to me, he was mean, illogical, blinded by emotions-]

"And what are you?"

Mew shook, and cried softly into his tail. I staggered over to my pokemon, and returned each to their Pokeballs. I paused for a moment at Overdose, as he slowly bled out at the tip of his torn tail.

\_Well, I didn't kill him then, and I suppose I won't leave him to die now. Plus, for whatever reason, he did risk his life for us. In the very least I can safely transport him back to the mental facility in a Pokeball. \_

With a flash of light, he accompanied me as well.

[I wanted to kill him.] Mew spoke softly, shaking. [I wanted to hurt him. To make him suffer; to hurt him like he hurt me.]

"Hate is a powerful emotion. I didn't want to-"

[I don't \_hate him!\_] Mew exclaimed, shaking with tears. [In a world full of life and wonder, I am \_ALONE. \_Everyone has their duo, their pair, to which they can love and feel kinship. Image my joy and \_wonder \_that humans could make my pair with \_science. \_Image my curiosity, and the feeling in my ageless heart as I contemplated the idea of, for once, not being alone.]

I stood, immobilized with heart-wrenching realization.

[Then imagine my disappointmentâ€¦when they came up with this. Heâ€¦he is so \_close. \_The humans were on the cusp of creating my opposite, my pair, the one that I could spend the eons with in \_companionship \_and harmony, but insteadâ€¦they befouled my creationâ€¦]

"You loved him."

Mew paused, taking a shaky breath. [No. I loved what he could \_become. \_I realized I could fix him. I realized I could heal him of his deformities and pain, his mortality, but I could never change his \_mind. \_When I realized he was so susceptible to hate, when I realized his power and anger at his creatorsâ€¦] he shook, and I grabbed him in a fierce hug. [I-I couldn't do it. Image him, immortal. Image him, his hate, his wrath, forever. I-I couldn't

justify it. B-but I can't, I can't go on forever alone, not when I was \_so close, \_not when I had \_hope, \_hope against the eternal tides of loneliness.]

For a while, I just let him cry. I let him cry for the millennia of isolation he had suffered though, and the centuries of cold, quiet desolation.

I never thought of life as a burden.

[Y-you're hurt.] He sniffed, after a moment.

I smiled weakly, and held my side. "A little. How about we make it out of this cave, and I get you the biggest tub of ice cream you've ever seen?"

He laughed lightly, filling the air with his sad but sentimental amusement. [I-I'll take you up on that, Josh. Thank you.]

[Don't mention it.] I smiled, leaning heavily against his side.

\* \* \*

><p><p>

"You s-should transform. You'll be conspicuous-"

[Are you sure you're alright? We've come a long way; your body is showing signs of fatigue and strain.]

"I'll be fine. Just a few more steps."

Mew wrapped himself around my wrist, and once again adopted the form of my strange, backwards watch.

A grand, massive, multi-structured glossy red building staggered over us, overwhelming me with gratitude and awe. Only a small number of people had ever made it out of the Cave, and a smaller number still had the privilege of making it into the poke center on the top of the world. It was a misnomer of course; there were much taller mountains all across the world, but none in Kanto were harder to trek then the Cave.

I had made it. No, \_we \_had made it. I pressed my hand on the automatic door, leaning against in heavy as my breath fogged the glass. No more condescending remarks of how 'I had just started my journey'. No more condescension from trainers more experienced then I, because now, I was one of the most experienced trainers. Best of the best. I had survived, and I was about to prove my worth to all of Kanto by defeating the Elite Four.

The door slid open, and I limped inside. Four of the staff stopped what they were doing to give me a bug-eyed expression of incredulity and surprise. In their career, it was doubtful more than one or two people had made it out of the caves alive.

"Move!" One of the more experienced nurses ordered, pushing some staff member's aside and running to grab a hospital bed. Two more nurses grabbed and steadied me on both sides to keep me from falling.

"Are you alright, sir?" One of the nurses asked. She was smaller than the others, wide-eyed and fearful.

"Well enough." I realized I likely looked like death, with my shirt stained red, and my lips covered in cracked, dried blood. The nurse from earlier wheeled the bed behind me, and pushed me lightly onto it.

"Firstâ€¦" I croaked and unclipping my belt, handing my PokÃ©mon off to the wide-eyed nurse, "Heal them. Most just need rest, but the Raichu lost his tail. He isn't mine, andâ€¦"

"We'll fix everything, sir. Just lay back." The nurse ordered shakily, wheeling me into the first available room. Another nurse took my PokÃ©mon to another station, presumably to be healed. The nurse wasted no time hooking me up to an IV and getting my pulse and vitals checked. She stared guiltily for a moment, before once again looking at the monitors.

"Alright, everything's good to go. You have some bruising and light internal bleeding, but with some rest, you'll be okay."

"Are you okay?"

The doctor flinched at the question, looking unnerved. "I-I'm fine." She gave me an unsure, nervous glare. "Now, get some rest."

I tried to ask more, but my body felt paralyzed and heavy. I fell onto the bed, with my eyes slowly closing without my permission.

[Sleep, Josh. You are wounded.]

[Mewâ€¦no, wait-]

[Sleep. The answers you seek will be there when you are conscious yet again.]

The effect wasn't unyielding and demanding like Mewtwo's, but it rendered the same effect. Exhausted from fighting, my will dissolved into nothingness, and I floated into blissful sleep.

\* \* \*

><p><p>

I held my head firmly, rubbing my eyes with disbelief. [You want to \_what?\_]

Everyone was in a circle, staring at Static dubiously. Static growled a bit, and motioned Nova, Myst, Skarr, and myself to take a few steps back. [Okay, we don't have a sixth, right? Oxygen \_did\_ help us in the fight, and he's a powerful pokemon. We're \_at\_ \_the\_ Elite Four; I say we cut our losses and use him as our sixth.]

[Um, that seems like a super bad idea.]

[You are completely devoid of reason.]



[You know he tried to kill you, right? Twice?]

I sighed, and cleared the air. [Moral issues aside, we already have an electric type on our team: you. We don't need another, especially one in the exact same evolutionary line.]

[But it can't \_hurt, \_right? We don't NEED him, but he would only be a help! We don't have a sixth â€" even a low level would be better than nothing, and Oxygen's a higher level than us all!]

Technically, he was right.

[Okay then, \_not \_putting moral issues aside.] I groaned. [He tried to kill you, Static. He almost succeeded.]

[He said he was sorry!] Static whined.

[That doesn't resolve the issue.] I pressed my palm to my face. [Look, more important than power, then endurance and resolve, is \_heart \_and trust. I don't know what's in his heart, and I don't think I can ever trust-]

[I trust him.] Static nodded confidently.

[Static, even if you believe everything about his time at the hospital, and his so called 'change' from Overdose to 'Oxygen'-]

A slow, timid knock interrupted my thoughts. The door opened, and Oxygen stood awkwardly, with his hand at mid-knock. [Hey. Uh, finally got released from surgery, which is cool. The, uh,] Skarr and Myst gave him a cool glare, while Nova and I just looked wary. [The surgeon had to make my tail longer though. Feels a little weird.] He grinned nervously, and held his tail in his paws, feeling the slight extension. [Kinda likeâ€|well, like my tail grew an inch or two, hah.] he shrugged. The room returned his uneasy stare, save for Static.

[We were just talking about you!] Static waved Oxygen over, and with a reluctant wince Oxygen sat by his side. This entire conversation was giving me a headache, and I rubbed my temple accordingly.

[Okay, so let me understand this correctly.] I sighed, still rubbing my forehead. [You want to join our team?]

[Temporarily.] Oxygen explained. [Static and I talked about it on the way to find you.]

[Why?]

Oxygen took a deep breath, and blew it back out slowly. [I was, uh, I was pretty messed up at one point. I don't really know what makes people as jacked up as I got â€" maybe it was a bit of what I had gone through as a cub or whatever, I don't know, but I know some people that do.] Oxygen took another breath, to calm his nerves. [The MeadowCenter got me out of aâ€|pretty dark place, and they helped my friend Volt too, butâ€|they don't do it for, umâ€|] Overdose gave Static a helpless expression. [How do I convey the thought? \_Berries?\_]

[Food, or like, money. What humans use to get food.]

[That seems complicated, but yeah, food. They don't get a lot of food out of it, or money, or anything. It's aâ€¦umâ€¦]

[It's a non-profit.]

[YEAH!] Oxygen pointed at me, his eyes lighting up. [Yeah, that's what they called it! And since they don't earn a lot of food from it, it's not as nice as it should be. Iâ€¦I want to change that.]

[Oh?]

[I want to sell myself as a Legendary Hunter for profit at the Battle Park. I'm strong and skilled, and I know how to take out something bigger than me. I could help out MeadowCenter â€" they deserve it. They're smart and kind, and help messed up people likeâ€¦like I was.]

[Quite a change of heart.] Myst hissed from a corner. [If you want to go be a Legend Hunter, what's stopping you? Go do it. Go be. You don't need any help from us.]

[Well, one problem is getting there.] Oxygen answered honestly. [I don't want a vista. I want to live there, and the only way to do that is to either \_be \_a champion, or be related to someone who is. I know I'm strong enough to be an asset to your team, andâ€¦I just want to help, I guess. Help you guys, and help MeadowCenter.]

[So charitable.] Skarr droned from a corner. [We're to believe, then, that you want to help us, ultimately helping your mentalâ€¦hospital, or what have you, because ofâ€¦what? The goodness of your heart?]

[Because, I want to have an impact. I want something to matter, you know?] Oxygen slumped against the wall. [In my short time here, I've only managed to really mess stuff up, for a lot of people. Before Iâ€¦] Overdose drew a shaky breath. [â€¦I want to \_matter. \_I want to help people, and do more good than harm.]

[Before you what, die?] Skarr rolled his eyes. [What are you, thirty? You still have another good forty years.] Static grinded his teeth in sympathy, and Oxygen winced. [What?]

[A-actually I'm fourteen.] Oxygen admitted, biting his tongue. [Three years older than Static.]

We all let out a pent-up breath. \_Fourteen? \_He should be in his prime for a Raichu, instead ofâ€¦well, let's just say thirty was being a bit generous. He looked better than he used to, but he looked \_bad. \_Burned, gray fur, and a tired, thousand mile stare.

[They tell me I have about ten, good years left. Maybe thirteen if I lay low, and eat good andâ€¦stuff.] Oxygen and covered his eyes with a paw and shook.

Static scooted over and hugged the scarred, shaking Raichu.

[I-I don't w-want t-to die.] He choked, shivering on the bed.

We all gave him his space, and digested his words. It would help having a sixth, but was it worth the risk?

## 28. Within a Breath

"And, there are your discharge papers."

"Thank you very much."

"Not at all, sir." The wide-eyed nurse bowed, smiling at me politely. Still, her eyes shone a hint of fear? Or was that intrigue? It was something I couldn't identify; a quiet spark of intensity.

"I'll ask again—are you okay?" I asked. Her eyes almost dug into me, the way they pried with wanting. The nurse looked over her shoulder, then over my own. With a look of extreme urgency, she put her finger to her lips and grabbed me by my collar. She yanked me into an empty room, and swiftly locked the door.

"W-what's going—"

"What was in it?" She asked, her eyes hungering for knowledge.

"Huh?"

"The Cave." She was visibly shaking, with her hands held outwards trying to convey the force of her emotion. "I've worked here for two years, but no one has ever told me. They say they don't know but they're lying. I can feel it. I want to know so badly, but we're not supposed to ask, and no one ever tells. Please." She pressed her palms together, begging. "I need to know. What drove those men to insanity before the Great War? What is so terrible that it serves as a greater challenge than the Gauntlet of the Eight Gyms? What is inside it? What did you see; what did you experience? It is what they say? Is it living?" Her eyes burned into mine. "I need to know!"

I beckoned her closer. She eagerly placed her ear to my lips, and I could practically feel her curiosity burning off her flesh. I could feel her shaking with questions, and I knew exactly what to say.

"Judgment." I whispered, the words barely escaping my lips. I then turned, unlocked the door, and walked out.

"Wait!" The nurse screamed after me. "What does that mean? Judgment? What does it signify? Were you judged? Is Arceus still alive? What does it mean? Tell me!"

And I held a finger to my lips, and just smiled.

\* \* \*

><p>[An entire week!? Josh, we're right here!] Static squeaked with outrage.

[Static, try to understand.]

[Dude we could go face the Elite Four \_right now. \_They're literally right behind that line!] Static jabbed across the red, velvet plastic line that simply begged to be torn. [We could just go around there, and- look! There's Lance, \_right there\_, buying a soda! \_He's right there!\_] Static was shaking, and had a crazed, rabid look. [Why aren't we challenging him!?!]

I held my hands outward in an attempt to explain. [It's for building teamwork-]

[We've been building teamwork for \_months! \_This entire journey is about building teamwork! I have teamwork leaking out of my ears! This is stupid, Josh! Let's go fight the Elite Four \_right now!\_]

[If I may?] Skarr gave me a questioning look, and I nodded. [A few days ago, I mentioned that I feltâ€¦as if all of our time was divided with Josh and each other, instead of being trained one on one, like we used to.]

[So this was \_your \_idea.] Static growled.

[If I can continue.] Skarr growled back. Static gave a huff, but relented. [Although I feel as if Josh is taking my idea to a bit of an extreme, I believe his idea has merit. We can all gain much more expertise fighting for a week straight and getting one-on-one training then we ever could from group training.]

[And it doesn't have to be about training.] I nodded at Skarr, and he nodded back. [I've pushed you guys hard over the past few weeks, and you guys â€" all of you â€" have done amazingly, but pushing you guys isn't my only job. I'm your trainer yes, but we're also family, and friends. Maybe you want a week to talk about how you're feeling,] I gave Nova a small nod, and he gave me a shy, understanding smirk. [Or watch the sun set over the valley, or anything. \_Or train! \_Whatever you guys want to do, this is your time to do it. After this,] I held up my hand, and crunched it into a fist. [We face the Elite Four as a team, and show Kanto and the world just what we're made of!]

[YEAH!] Static cried, pumping his fist into the air. The others followed, cheering with excitement. Through the chaos, I saw a small orange hand wave, trying to get my attention.

[Yeah Nova?]

[Um, does this mean Overdose is going to be on our team?] Nova asked timidly.

I took a slow, deep breath. [He's going to get a week too, yes. I suppose we'll see from there.]

[Okay.] Nova nodded, appeased. Skarr and Myst looked annoyed, but said nothing.

[Alright. Anyone want to go first?]

\* \* \*

><p>[I'm just surprised you were so <em>adamant.<em> It wasn't like you.]

[You must be jesting. I've waited for this forâ€|well, not quite months, but it feels like an eternity.]

The horizon eclipsed the sun in a haze of beauty, enticing the night with inviting hues of pinks and orange. Although only the slightest whispers of the night's winds blew against my rough, warm jacket, the moon was high in the sky.

Skarr sighed contently, and relaxed his wings. [So. What will you do after?]

[Hmmm?]

[After all this.] Skarr waved a wing at the valley below us, the dark shades of green, and the purples of the coming night. [You stand, no longer at the base of the mountain, but within a breath of the very top. Once you reach the peakâ€|what will you do?]

We sat in silence, and watched the last of the sun melt past the valley. The colors ran freely in the sky, fading unto the deepest blue.

[Maybe I'll see other peaks to conquer.] I whispered.

[Is that what drives you? The need to be the best?] Skarr turned away from the stars, and looked at me with a golden eye.

Did I need to be the best? Was my position on this metaphorical mountain a way of showing off, or a symbol of status, dedication, and skill?

[No.] I shook my head. [Not really.]

[Then why travel? Why reach the peak?]

The deepest blue merged into the darkest black, with the moon shining in all its glory high up in the sky. My breath materialized before me, and I zipped my jacket up for warmth.

[I climb for the love of climbing. For the companionship of those I climb with, and the view I'll get when we all succeed.] Skarr smiled at my response, though he never tore his eyes off the night sky. [Why do you choose to climb? You could simply choose a life of meditation, and wooing women with your satire.]

Skarr snorted. [Simple. I'm lazy; beating the Elite four is much easier then courtship.]

[You've had your fair share to relationships!] I laughed.

[Number is irrelevant. Quality is important.]

[Oh? Only the shiny ones count?] I smirked.

[The quality of the relationships, pervert. Not the quality of the women.]

[I know what you meant.] I laughed.

Skarr grinned, and looked back at the night sky. [Ah, I missed this.

I recall so many nights of us watching the stars emerge at your home. I know it is selfish of me to reminisce of the days where you were filled with suchâ€¦]

[Teenage angst? Mild rebellion?] I scoffed.

[Pain.] Skarr answered, solemnly. I looked down, a hard pit forming in the base of my chest. I wasn't myself back then. [You try so \_hard \_now. I'm proud of you, butâ€¦I miss the days where I could give you advice.]

[Advice I would ignore?] I gave Skarr a weary smirk.

Skarr scoffed. [Well. No one is perfect. Plus that just meant I could give you more advice later.]

I rolled my eyes, and Skarr gave a chuckle.

[Hey, you never answered my question.]

[Oh?] Skarr tilted his head.

[Why do you choose to travel with me?]

Skarr smiled mysteriously, and glanced back at the moon. [Why do we have religions? Why do we have myths, and legends? Why do stories mean so much to us, and why are we so captivated by the setting of the sun, and rising of the moon?]

The sudden silence was torture. [Why?] I whispered, leaning closer. Skarr smirked and preened an out-of-place feather, making me squirm with impatience.

[Because they \_inspire \_us.] Skarr concluded, beaming at the night sky. [And you inspire me, Josh Karren. For now the moon holds my rapt attention, but in a few days, the trainers of Kanto won't be looking up at the moon.] Skarr turned, and gave me a wide smile. [They'll be looking up to you.]

[â€¦Thank you, Skarr.] I blinked back a tear or two, and hugged my metallic bird.

[Don't thank me. This is what I live for.] Skarr fell on his back, content to stare into the sky as the grass ruffled around his moonlit wings. [But then again, I'm just your melodramatic mount, right?]

[You're my \_favorite \_melodramatic mount.]

[And that's all I ask.] Skarr nodded contently into the night.

\* \* \*

><p>"Char!" Nova cried, slicing his claws into another Fearow. It fell like the others, and collapsed onto the grass, unconscious.<p>

[How you feelin', Nova?] I asked, clocking his time.

[Good! A few more days of this, andâ€¦] he trailed off, spotting

another Fearow and diving after it.

[Are you sure this is the best way to spend the week?] I called out to him. A blast of fire erupted in the grass, and I heard the familiar thump of Fearow flesh hitting the ground.

[Y-yeah, absolutely. I need to be at my best for the Elite four, after all. I wouldn't want toâ€¦] He looked away guiltily, searching for another Fearow.

[Look at me for a sec.] I asked.

Nova squirmed away and crossed his arms. [I'm fine.]

[It's okay to be insecure, Nova.]

[Is it?] He asked, whirling around to face me with angry, chilling draconic eyes. [How many times have we had this talk? How many times do you have to reassure me, and how many times must I conquer my demons? H-howâ€¦] He choked a bit and shook his head, keeping me at arm's length. [Iâ€¦I just feel like I should be over this by now. We should be talking about strategies and attacks, notâ€¦trying to make me not feel like a failure for the thousandth time. I should be over this. I should be better than thisâ€¦]

He slumped over, but no tears fell. It wasn't anger in his eyes, more of dull, grudging frustration.

[Hey.] I sat next to him.

He leaned into me, and hugged me lightly. [I'm sorry, Josh. I-]

[Don't be.] I hugged back. He nestled into my shirt a bit and sighed. [Some demons are tough. Some go for more than a few rounds.]

[S-so what? I deal with this forever? I'm j-just born to be useless?]

[No, you're born to be amazing,] I smiled, and poked in the belly, [And achieve greatness despite your flaws.]

Nova smiled weakly. [â€¦Thanks. I just, I would feel better if this wasn't the thousandth time we've had this conversation. I'm justâ€¦I don't know. Training'll clear my head, plus I need to be stronger for the Elite Four.]

[Forget about the Elite Four for a second.] I ordered. Nova blinked in surprise, and looked up. [Seriously. We've been at this for hours, and I don't think you can learn much more from finding two or three more ways to knock out a Fearow. If the Elite Four wasn't an issue, what would you be doing right now? Instead of stressing and fighting with yourself, what would you do to relax and clear your head?]

Nova looked at me for a while, then looked down, and scratched his chin. [Honestly?]

[Honestly.]

[â€¦is there a hotel near here?]

\* \* \*

><p>[Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives  
<em>extraordinary.</em>] Nova quoted, just a second before Robin  
Williams, grinning ear to ear.

[This is you, huh? You're a cinephile.]

[Cine-what?] Nova reluctantly turned his attention away from the  
screen, and gave me a look of confusion.

[Nothing.] I laughed. Nova turned his attention back to the screen,  
his tail flicking back at forth as he watching the actors. While his  
choice in movies was superb (A Few Good Men, Pulp Fiction, and now  
The Dead Poet Society) it was odd seeing him completely at ease. His  
normally wide, fearful eyes were comfortably half-open, watching  
attentively, but calmly, and relaxed.

"We're trying very hard to understand why it is you insist on defying  
us! Whatever the reason, we're not going to let it ruin your life.  
Tomorrow, I'm withdrawing you from Welton and enrolling you in  
Brighton Military School."

"But, that's ten more years! Father, that's a \_lifetime!\_"

"Oh, don't be so dramatic! You make it sound like a prison term!"

[I hate this part.] Nova frowned, and covered an eye.

[It's important to the movie though.]

[Well, of course. It conveys the intensity of emotion and the  
futility of trying to deny your own, about making meaningful choices  
and seizing opportunity, 'sucking the marrow out of life', butâ€|]  
Nova sighed as the gun went off. [It's still so \_sad.\_ The  
realization. The pain. The last noble standing-on-the-desks, and  
'Captain My Captain'. I know it's the pain that makes this movie so  
incredible, memorable, and impactful, butâ€|ach. It \_hurts.\_]

I stared at the screen biting back tears as the father demanded that  
his son 'wake up'. [Yeah.]

[Hey Josh?]

[Mmmm?]

[Thanks forâ€|this.] Nova motioned at the room. [I feel better. Not,  
like, fixed, but-]

[I know.] I smiled. Nova crawled over and gave me a quick hug, before  
settling back down on the bed, settling back with a calm, happy  
sigh.

\* \* \*

><p>"Incorrect, it is weak. Electricity attacking  
grass."<p>

[N-normal.]



"Incorrect, it is weak. Fire attacking steel."

[Weak.]

I maintained my composure, clenching my fist. "Incorrect. It is strong."

[This is \_insulting!\_] Mew shouted, his fists flying up in fury.[Your little 'weekend off' is pointless for me! I am a \_god. \_If something stands in my way, I destroy it!]

"The sun is a hundred times the size of the earth, and shines with enough radiation to fry us all a thousand times over. Yet, we only feel a miniscule fraction of its heat due to its placement in space. Raw power means nothing without precision."

Mew flexed his wrist, and a torrent of fire obliterated a nearby tree, blasting it into ashes, then creating a boom that emanated across the valley. [I have precision \_and \_power. I am creation \_and \_death. I am a god, and I will not be belittled by a \_mortal\_.]

A Graveler peeked its head out of a nearby hole to inspect the noise. It growled, and walked towards us menacingly.

"Alright. Defeat that Graveler then."

[Easily.] Mew scoffed, shooting a large collection of electric bolts at the Graveler.

It's tiny, beaded eyes didn't even register the attack. Mew blinked in confusion before getting hit in the gut with a Roll-out, nearly getting smashed.

[Augh.] Mew rose up and rubbed a layer of mud off his coat, then blasted the Graveler with a beam of ice. This time, the Graveler \_did \_take notice, though the beam seemed to do little more than aggravate the rocky beast as it bounced off. The Graveler turned and smashed against Mew again, rocking his foundation and sending him to the ground. Mew groaned and pushed himself to standing, shaking on his tiny paws. [Die!] He ordered, sending a wave of fire crashing against the Graveler, who merely shrugged it off as he continued to this third and final blow.

Mew was forcefully inserted into the ground, with imprints of the Graveler's rocky flesh covering his body. I growled and tossed a poke-toy to the side as a distraction, and went to talk to Mew.

"You disappoint me."

[Iâ€¦I am a godâ€¦] Mew struggled to stand, me glaring from the mud.

"You \_were \_a god." I spat.

[I am a god! I am creation! I travel with you on a \_whim; \_do not tempt me, fool, or I will leave you just as easily as I found you!]

"Then leave me, and die a hundred more times at the hands of an

inferior enemy."

Mew's eyes burned with hate. "Mewtwo was my equal!"

"Funny how an equal bested you a hundred fold."

[Silence!]

"And a hundred times again!"

[What do you want from me!?] Mew cried, paws shaking in nonsensical fury. [My lens of reality has been \_fractured. \_My memories erased, possibly for all eternity. My hopes are no longer my own, and I live in a body that this unfamiliar and alien! This mind has gaps of logic, and contains fallacies I don't yet comprehend as false! \_What do you want from me!?\_]

"I want to help you." I offered him a hand. Mew pouted, and looked at it dubiously. "If we are to be a team, you have to trust me, but more than that, you have to be at your best. We're not fighting wild PokÃ©mon in there â€" we're fighting my gods. The people I've looked up to since I was a child. I see \_so much\_ potential in you, but if you refuse to listen to me, there is nothing I can do."

Mew was silent for a long moment, then took my hand. [I want to be strong again.]

"I can help you."

[I want to be \_revered \_again.]

"I can get you there."

[I want to challenge the strongest opponents this world has to offer.]

I grinned my perfect, devilish smile. "I'll have you fighting dragons."

\* \*  
\*

><p>"Gyarados!"<p>

[Lightningbolt!]

"Dragonite!"

[Icebeam!]

"Metagross!"

[Flamethrower!]

"And, Graveler!"

[Psystrike, and a flick for good measure!] Mew grinned, mimicking a swipe of his pinkish paw.

"How do you feel?"

[Powerful. Unstoppable.]

"Good. We're going to need every ounce of that."

Mew nodded, the adrenalin of my rapid-fire questions slowly draining. [In actual combat, do you think I will be adequate, and that I will retain this newly found knowledge?]

"In actual battles, I'll be instructing you. It's also my job to heal the others and pay attention to what you can't see, which is why it's important for you to also know what to do. That being said, most of the time I'll be giving you instructions and support."

[I look forward to battling along your side.] Mew nodded solemnly, his tail flicking back and forth.

\* \* \*

><p>[<em>Woohoo!<em>] Static screamed, twirling through the air on the back of a wild Fearow, clinging on for dear life as he shocked the bejesus of out the poor bird. [Eat it, you pile of feathers! Hahahaha!]

[Watch out!] I laughed as the bird suddenly dived. Static bounced off it with expert precision, and the bird crashed into the ground unconscious.

[Ta-da!] Static grinned, giving me a little mock bow.

[Well. You're ready.] I laughed, leaning my arm down and inviting him to climb up.

Static needed no further incentive, and climbed up. [Hardly, butâ€|thanks.]

[What do you mean, 'hardly'? Don't tell me you're going all Nova too!]

['Too'? Who else is like Nova?]

[Mew was a bit down. We talked about-]

[Mew? He's a freakin' ANCIENT. What's he got to be scared of? He'll blast them all into bits!]

[Well, we worked on him blasting people into bits more efficiently. I think he's still a bit unsure, but like Nova I think it'll kick in once we start battling and winning.]

Static smiled, but it was a bit off. [Well, that's good.]

I frowned. [What's bothering you?]

Static sat on my shoulder, and sighed. [I shouldn't be here, Josh.]

[What are you talking about?]

[Look at your team for a moment. You have an Ancient, a

Pseudo-Dragon, an extremely rare Illusionist, one of the best defensive Pok mon that exists, a Raichu that use to fight for blood, and me.]

[What's wrong with having you? You have more heart than anyone, Static!] I poked him in the belly, and he giggled somewhat. [You've been with me since the beginning!]

[Yes, but that's the \_only \_reason I'm still here. I'll try my best, yeah, but I'm no \_ancient. \_I'm no \_dragon. \_Three times I've needed to come through for you   the last two gyms and the Cave   I've fainted, Josh. It's not training, and it's not your fault or mine. It's my species.]

[There's nothing wrong with your species! Nearly half of the trainers in Vermilion owned a Pikachu.]

[Yeah, beginning trainers. How many Champions won with one?]

I bit my lip. He was right   I couldn't name a single one.

[See?] he pressed. [I'm not saying I'm 'going Nova' or whatever, I'm just I know I probably shouldn't be here, that's all.]

[Static.] I looked him in the eye, and he looked back with a sad, accepting gaze. [You more than \_anyone \_deserve a place at my side when \_we \_beat the Elite Four \_together. \_You're right   there are stronger Pok mon out there, but none as dedicated and as committed as you. You're the one that has stuck by my side for all these years, and you're the one that's going to be at my side in the end. Don't give up on me now.]

Static leaned against my face and sighed. [I'm not \_giving up, \_I'm just reminiscing, I guess. More than anything, I wish I could be stronger for you. For \_us. \_For the group, and for our dream. Like Oxygen, without the crazy evil stuff. I want to evolve.] Static looked up. [I know it's expensive and impossible, but I don't know. I guess I just wanted you to know.]

I felt the familiar pain in my gut as I continued my lie to Static. How long had I kept this con going? Sandy's disappointed gaze flashed in my memory. I tried to lie again, or at least half-lie, but the words wouldn't form in my mouth. I settled for simply scratching him behind the ear, and he sighed contently.

[Thanks, Josh. I just I needed to get that out there.]

He deserved more than this. He deserved the truth.

[Static ] I started but trailed off, unsure of how to proceed.

[What's up, Josh?]

[ Thunderstones aren't a million dollars.] I shut my eyes, awaiting the angry, justified retribution. [They're about twenty, and they're at the market we just flew from.]

I didn't know what would happen. I didn't know what to expect, all I knew was that I deserved it.

[That'sâ€¦great news?] Static blinked, confused at my guilty demeanor. [Why don't we just fly down and get it, then?] I watched anxiously as the pieces began to fit together in his mind. [Wait. Why didn't you just tell me when we were there? Whâ€¦why didn't you just buy it? Why did they go down in price so much?]

If I was telling him the truth, I would tell him all of it. He deserved to know. [T-they didn't go down in price. They've always been around twenty.]

Static gave me a horrified look, and climbed off my shoulder.

[Y-youâ€¦] He began, starting at me with startled confusion. [You lied to me.]

[â€¦Yes.]

He was silent for a long moment, just staring at the ground. [Bâ€¦but why?]

[I was afraid you wouldn't consider the choice fully. Power is one thing to consider, but-]

[But it was \_my \_choice to make!] Static yelped. I shrunk back. [Right? This is \_my body, \_shouldn't \_I \_get to choose what happens to it?]

[Y-yes. I was, I was wrong-]

[More than that! You lied, Josh! You lied to \_me!\_]

[I had reasons to suspect-]

[Your reasons are bullshit!] Static waved his arms angrily.

[-that you would choose based on what you thought I would want, instead of what you wanted.]

[That doesn't even make sense!]

[Listen-]

[NO! You listen!] Static demanded, smashing his paw against the ground. [At the core of this, at the center, at the very freaking beginning, this is built on trust. It wasn't about learning how to attack, it wasn't about learning how to dodge, it was about \_listening to you \_and trusting you, man! I cannot \_believe \_we are having this conversation while standing within a stone's throw of the \_Elite Four itself!\_]

[I-I'm sorry-]

[I don't care right now.] Static shouted. [Is this my choice, or not!?!]

[Yes, but-]

[I don't \_care\_] Static cut me off again. [Don't cloud this! It's

simple. Is it my choice, or not?]

[Yes.] I gulped. [Yes, it's your choice.]

[Then return me to my pokeball, go fly down to Celadon, and get me my Thunderstone.]

[But Static-]

[DO IT.] He ordered, his eyes burning with betrayal and anger. I returned him to his pokeball, and sighed with regret.

Skarr blinked with confusion when I sent him out, noticing my pained expression. [What do you need?]

[Iâ€¦I need to get to Celadon, to fix an old mistake.]

Skarr didn't need a better reason. [Hop aboard.]

\* \* \*

><p>(Static POV)<p>

Josh released me farther away than he normally did. Probably to give him some time to talk or something. It was a stupid gesture, and I tried my best to ignore it while bounding up to him.

[Static, before we do this-]

[Give me the stone.] I ordered, extending my paw impatiently.

[You're not thinking this through!]

[It isn't your \_right \_to decide what choices I make! Give me the damn stone.]

Josh shuddered. [Just, pleaseâ€¦give me some time to talk.]

[You have a minute.]

Josh took a shaky breath. [I'm worried it'll change you, Stat. For the worse. Not only will you become a different fighter, you'll become a different person. You'll still have all the memories, but not the same emotions. Feelings. You won't be the same Static that I grew up with, snuck meals with. I won't be able to carry you anymore. It won't be you anymoreâ€¦]

[Are you done?]

[Yeah.] Josh swallowed hard, offering me the stone.

I knocked it out of his hand, and into the grass at his feet. It rolled a little, then stopped at his shoe. Josh picked it up slowly, finally letting out a sigh of understanding. [You never wanted the stone.]

[No. The entire reason I wanted to evolve was for \_you\_.To get better for \_you.\_] I jabbed my finger into his shin. [I don't understand \_why \_you think I'm better off as a Pikachu than as a Raichu, but

I\_choose \_to trust your judgment because that's what I do. I \_trust you. \_To hell and back and all of that. And \_that's\_ why we're going to win.]

[I'm sorry for lying to you, Static.]

[You're an idiot.] I looked up, and smiled weakly. [But I forgive you. Now, the next time you send me out, I want to be battling, you hear?]

[I hear you.]

[Alright! And Josh?]

[Yeah Static?]

[I love you, man.] I clawed up his leg, and hugged me fiercely with his tiny paws.

He hugged me back just as fiercely. [I love you too, Stat.]

[Alright. Now let's go make our dreams a reality.]

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

[So, how do you want your week to go, Myst?]

[Depends. How's Nova?]

[He'sâ€|alright.]

[Just alright?]

Watching movies and laughing with Nova was cathartic; the way he smiled genuinely when a classic line was repeated, or his bubbly laugh when a character gave a witty reply â€" I could tell it was\_him. \_He could strike down the Fearows swooping about the Valley with one claw, and breathe blasts of fire some dragons could envyâ€|

â€|but his deepest enemy was himself. I felt spent â€" I didn't understand the trouble plaguing him, and I felt the best solution would be to simply continue building him up. In the face of repeated success, how could he doubt himself?

My gut rocked back and forth as I gave a mediocre [Yeah, he's alright]. It tasted a lie.

Myst stared back at me with curious, but cautious gaze. [Iâ€|would wish to spend my week with him.]

[Oh?]

[I believe I could motivate him in ways that you may be unable to-] I snorted, and Myst gave an angry blush. [Are you quite finished?]

[Yes, yes. I apologize.] I giggled, trying to maintain a serious expression.

[Males.] Myst glared at me as I clenched my teeth, trying not laugh. [Ways \_motivating \_him that don't need to be inherently sexual. I would like to try; I may succeed or I may fail, but I believe it to be a good use of our time if it has the chance to unlock Nova's potential.]

[Okay, I'm fine with that; it seems like a good idea. Would you two prefer to be alone?]

[You can watch us train if you would like.] Myst shrugged, looking to the side as if weighing options in her mind.

[I suppose that was the wrong question.] I cleared my throat redundantly. [Do you feel comfortable training with Nova in my absence, or do you feel as if my presence is mandatory for this idea to succeed?]

Myst bowed, her eyes flashing with confidence. [I have full confidence in our abilities, my liege.]

[I'll leave you two to it, then.]

\* \* \*

><p>(Myst POV)<p>

I remember laughter. I was so serious at first, but there was something about him that made me lose all sense of severity and thoughtfulness. I don't remember what we said before; all I recall is the laughter, rolling around in the crisp, clean grass of the valley, clutching each other tightly as we tumbled at gravity's whim.

The universe was a blur of spinning color and mirth, trading between shades of greens and adorable, giggly oranges. At last, we rolled to a stop, panting and catching our breath. I felt Nova's hand eclipse my own as we both lay disoriented, staring up into the spinning, blurred blue sky.

"We're going to hurt ourselves." I giggled, the sky gradually slowing.

"It's worth it, to recapture that day." Nova hummed to my side, rubbing my paw in his own. He turned to me and leaned against my side, his warm fur brushing against my own. "I'm glad you choose this. I thought we had to choose training or something, otherwise I would've chosen to hang out with you too, I just thought-"

I lazily reached around and placed my paw in his mouth. To Nova it was simply playful, and a way of covertly telling him he was blathering, but to me it was so much more. \_Turning over. \_A hurdle I had struggled with my entire life, now accessible at a mere whim of my hand. Nova bit my hand teasingly and placed it on his chest with a contented sigh.

"Hey Nova?" I turned, eyeing my small, adorable Charizard.



"Mmmm?"

"How do you feel, now that we're at the Elite Four?"

Nova rested a paw under his head, and gazed up at the sky. "I dunno. The same, I guess. Maybe a bit worse; I mean, stuff \_matters \_now. If I failed before, we could just re-try. If I fail now..."

I turned, and faced him with a frustrated smirk. "You've never failed. You know that right? Literally, since I have met you, I have \_never \_seen you fail. Ever."

"Thanks." Nova smiled, but his heart wasn't into it. "I justâ€|whenever I think about battling when it \_matters, \_my stomach turns into knots. I remember all the other times, butâ€|I don't know. I can't harness that confidence I felt back thenâ€|"

"Then fake it." I shrugged.

Nova smirked. "I don't think that's healthy."

"No, what's not healthy is a constant sense of unworthy and inadequacy." Nova cringed and tried to look away, but I scooted closer and tilted his head to face my own. "Hey. I'm not mad at you."

"I-I'm just, I can't help it. It's just the kind of person I am."

"And what is a person?" I climbed on top of my furry little dragon, and rested my head on his chest.

"I-I don't know? A collection of emotions?"

"A collection of \_roles.\_" I smirked, gazing upon him with a lazy scarlet eye.

"Huh?"

"Think of it. How you act in my company, \_kind, playful. \_Then, in Josh's presence. \_The timid, but resilient.\_ In a gym? \_Powerful, but reserved. \_Different roles, making up who you are."

"How would you know so much about roles?" Nova asked, raising an eyebrow.

"We have a different name for them in my tribe. Nithaki, like...masks. We perfect these across our lives, presenting different ones to each person we meet. My illusions aren't simply refractions of light â€" they're how I convey emotion, status, and feeling."

Nova sat quietly, waiting for me to continue.

"Ever notice how I seem smaller in Josh's presence, putting loyalty and honor at the forefront? How my fur turns black at the sight of an enemy instead of its hues of gray, and how my eyes go from ruby to blood?"

"And what form do you take when you're with me?" Nova whispered,

tracing a finger through my fur.

I smirked. "My point is, all we are is a collection of roles, masks. If you want to be better, then simply be better."

Nova frowned. "It's not that simple for me."

"Then don't be you. Be someone else." I shrugged. Nova gave me a curious look. "Actors, on a stage. Maybe they're timid, or nervous, but they aren't, because their roles are not timid or nervous. They are whatever their role is, because that is what they need to be."

"Actors?" Nova mumbled to himself.

"Think it over, Nova. Who do you want to be?"

Nova thought for a moment, curling me up in a hug. "Someone strong. Powerful, confident. Someone who wouldn't hesitate to call themselves a dragon, who is fierce, fearless, and unstoppable."

"And what would their name be?" I purred.

Nova scrunched his face in thought. "Something something related to my name. Stars, space, fire and stuff."

"Supernova?"

"Ehh. This person isn't better than me, just different. He's not a 'super' version of me."

"Hmmm. What about, like your opposite? Like a vortex or something?"

"Vortex." Nova nodded, smiling widely. "Yeah. That's the one."

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

[You don't trust me.]

He weaved in and out of foes attacks as if he was made of liquid. Calling him fast would be a lie; he was neither fast nor slow, he was the exact speed he needed to be in the situation. There were times I swore I saw him get smashed by a Graveler's fist, but he always escaped unscathed, and counter-attack with precision and perfection. Despite their same heritage, Oxygen fought nothing like Static. Static was headstrong and fierce, but Oxygen was something more. His fighting style wasn't fighting, it was art, reborn on the battlefield.

[No. I don't.]

I was honest. I enjoyed being honest, and here I had no reason to lie. He may be the strongest Pokémon I had, but that hadn't meant he had earned a place on our team. I recalled my week with Mew, saying that power was nothing without control. Here, I felt as if I couldn't control Oxygen. He was an unpredictable piece on a chessboard that I had worked so long to turn to my favor.

[I suppose I would consider you a fool if you did.] Oxygen turned away, and glanced at his tail. A small strap of cloth was tied around the midsection of his tail; a cautionary reminder of what almost was.

[Do you consider Static a fool?]

Oxygen thought for a moment, tracing his paw over the cloth.  
[â€|Yes.]

I suppose I valued his honesty, even if it was at Static's expense. I motioned towards his tail. [How does it feel?]

[Different.] Oxygen frowned. [It's longer now, and the weight is off. Makes me feel unbalanced. I'll get used to it, I suppose. Don't have a choice.]

We stood in tense silence for a moment. It had been like this for the better part of two days, training, with mixes of uncomfortable silence and even more uncomfortable conversation.

[I know how I want to spend the rest of my time.] Oxygen announced.

[Oh?]

[I amâ€|unable to say how much I want this.] Overdose shivered, clenching his paw. [How much I \_want \_to make an impact in this world, but I can still show you. For the remainder of my time, I want to battle the others. I want to show them my conviction, and let them express their anger and betrayal at me through combat. I want to test their mettle against my own.]

I rubbed my chin. [You think fighting them will change their mind?]

[I think there's a chance, and at this point...] He sighed, spitting on the grass. [I'll take what I can get.]

## 29. Ice Breaker

Myst was the first to volunteer. We found a relatively flat section of green at the bottom of the valley, and everyone was staring with eager anticipation as Oxygen and Myst glowered at each other, circling like sharks.

[You should know, I have no personal vendetta against you.] Myst mentioned almost casually.

[You hate me. You hate me just like the others, for what I've done.] Oxygen grimaced. [You were one of the first to ostracize me, and to claim I was unworthy of joining your group.]

[Oh, no. I don't hate you at all, I just think you're unstable. Trust me, when you've spent a lifetime in the shadows, all you see are shades of gray.] Her red eyes sparkled, and her fur blackened as she spoke. [I no longer think of myself as able to hate, only able to judge who I can trust, and who I can deceive. I don't believe you as

either of those two, and thus, I have no reason to associate myself or my comrades with the likes of you.]

[I have power, and skill. I can be an asset.] Oxygen offered.

[What is strength, compared to cunning?] A Myst stepped out of the first, smirking with confidence.

[What is power, compared to precision?] another pondered, appearing out of the second.

[What is force, without control?] a fourth asked, stepping out of the first. Four Mysts smirked in unison, strutting towards Oxygen with eyes of dangerous maroon.

[I'll show you what I'm capable of.] Oxygen snarled, pounding a fist into its twin, and duplicating his own form with Double Team.

[A battle of mirrors, then?] One of the Mysts scoffed. [You should know I have ways of seeing through lies.] The mimics each glared warily at each other, with Myst's moving cautiously and independently, and Oxygen's in a strict formation.

Suddenly, one of the Mysts dove onto an Oxygen seemingly at random with trailing black shadow flying off her claws. That Oxygen dissolved into nothingness, and another leapt forward to strike at the 'real' Myst, electricity pulsing at the end of his tail.

He struck the Myst in the side, but that too disappeared into nothingness. Oxygen cringed, now exposed.

[Tsk. You should know to always leave your last illusion for yourself.] Myst grinned, striking Overdose in the gut. Her eyes went wide as she hit nothing but air, overextended her fist.

[A lesson I learned long ago.] a booming voice spoke behind her, smashing an extremely real tail into the square of her back. She cried in surprise, bouncing against dirt and gravel as electricity coursed through her fur. [You know I can be an asset.] Oxygen continued, earning a growl from Myst who grudgingly pushed her way to standing. [And after all, who are you to judge me, self-proclaimed thief and liar?]

[When sleep comes at night, I fall effortlessly into its grasp. When the earth whispers my name, and my sleep shall become eternal, I shall heed it's words without fear. Can you say the same, 'Oxygen'?] Myst mocked, standing on all fours, and glowing with white light. [Or do you fear death, and the Judgment for your sins?]

She started growing. Ten feet, twenty, until she was bigger than Sandy's cottage. She was nearly the size of a mansion when she stopped, her now white fur glowing with radiance as hard streaks of yellow and gold circled around her.

She became Arceus.

[Do you fear Judgment?] She boomed, smashing a massive foot against the grass next to Oxygen, splintering the ground with a wave of blackness. Oxygen dodged to the side, his pupils the size of pinpricks as he stared at the metaphysical reincarnation of his

maker. [Do you fear \_death?\_] The Arceus swept his head down like a scythe, catching Oxygen in the chest in a wave of obsidian colored energy. It cracked into him like a wave, crashing against his side and throwing him to the ground below.

[You're all masks and lies!] Oxygen growled, bounding upwards to face the now-black Arceus head on.

[Are you anything else?] The Arceus countered, raising another massive foot. [Overdose, then Oxygen. Murderer, then charity-case. What role do you truly play, and which mask do you choose as your face?] Oxygen dove to the side, narrowly avoiding a house-sized crater created by the pseudo-Arceus. [Look at you run. When I look at you, all I see is cruelty! Why should you earn our pity?]

Oxygen dove under another massive foot and leapt at the sole, catching a startled Myst out of thin air and dissipating the god-like illusion. [Because I am learning to see truth.] Oxygen then smashed Myst back into the ground, and held his tail like a knife at her throat.

Myst laughed hollowly. [That's it, then. You've bested me. Go ahead, take your kill. Taken it like all the others you've murdered.]

[I want to fix the world, not destroy it.]

[What are you looking for from me? Absolution? Redemption? You're a sinner praying to a heretic. I lost my way long ago, friend, and I've found comfort in the way of the damned.]

Oxygen removed his tail from her throat, and extended his paw. [Maybe I'm just looking for understanding right now, and believe me, I know I'm asking a lot.]

Myst gazed at the hand, snorting and pushing it herself to standing without it. [I appreciate the gesture, but no, not yet.]

Overdose sighed reluctantly, then turned to a sullen face at me. [Who's next?]

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

[I just, I don't see why this is necessary. Shouldn't we be working together?] I shrugged as Myst pushed me onto the battlefield.

[Please.] Oxygen held one paw in its twin in a weird attempt to look vulnerable and sincere. [I know there is bad blood between us, and Iâ€¦I want to overcome it.]

[There isn't a \_need, \_though.] I explained. [There's no bad blood here. You, you just were in a bad circumstance, and made some bad choices. It's over â€" you're better now, and you're turning your life around. I just, I-I don't harbor any resentment towards you.]

[You're lying.] Oxygen frowned.

I felt my face heat up at the accusation, and I fought it back down.  
[I'm not, I just-]

[Nova!] Myst thought to me in private. [Don't fight it. Don't be you. Remember?]

"Vortexâ€|" I whispered quietly to myself.

[Don't let your emotions block you, let \_his \_guide you.] She urged.

[Tell me how you truly feel.] Oxygen's tail flicked behind him, eager to engage me.

[Honestly?] A feeling of heat rose inside my chest. [You nearly killed one of my closest friends. You caused Josh to suffer for days, and because of you, my love was sent to the bowels of hell to retrieve an innocent that your entourage forced to act as your hostage. You are a fowled, evil, broken man, who used his past to wound others for pleasure!]

[I am trying to mend the wounds I have caused.] Oxygen tensed.

[Wounds do not mend so simply!] A torrent of fire blasted from my mouth, searing the grass under my foe as he twisted and dodged my flames. [Heat may melt the skin and mend wounds faster than you; shall I try to fix your broken soul through Dragon Fire?]

Oxygen knelt and sent a stream of electricity into my wings. I had forgotten they were even there until I felt the electricity course through them, wracking me with shivers and spasms.

\_Ah! Th-this isn't working, I can't hit him; he's too strong!\_

\_No, that's my thoughts. What would Vortex think?\_

I sucked in a massive breath, and blasted the valley with a sea of white, brilliant fire. Overdose was caught in its core, and took the full brunt of the attack, burning with the force and might of my ancestors. He cursed loudly, using the smoke and haze of my attack to his advantage, charging at me, swirling his tail like one would a spiked chain. Oxygen raced around another gout of my flame, and bashed me with his tail, or attempted to. I caught the thunderbolt of his tail with my claws and crunched my fist around it, ignoring the screaming pain from my muscles as scorching electricity bounded through my bicep. Without even trying, my eyes shone white as I threw him to the ground, and crushed him under my foot. Long, fierce draconic claws grew out of my fist, and I aimed them at his throat.

Oxygen stared back at the claws, his eyes patient but wary. [I'm just trying to make amends. Trying to remind some of the pain I caused, and maybeâ€|form a bond between you all, if I can.]

[Gods do not associate themselves with \_wurms.\_] I spat, cursing him in a draconic tongue. [There will never be a bond between us, and the only thing that douses my wrath is the will of my friends. Though I may fight alongside you, you will never be my ally.]

I withdrew my claws, and stepped off him. Josh hadn't yet called a victor, but I knew there was no ambiguity. I hadn't just won, I demolished him. He never stood a chance.

\* \* \*

><p>(Oxygen POV)<p>

I wiped the sweet potion off my lips with an arm, leaving a trail of crust as the sticky residue left my maw and stained my fur. [Who's next?]

[I'll show you your place.] the metallic bird spoke, walking casually where Nova once stood.

I gave an exasperated grin. [I would prefer it if my place was here, at your sideâ€|]

Skarr remained silent, eyeing me slowly.

[Where do think I belong, Skarmory?] I asked cautiously, my tail coiling and uncoiling behind me with a life of its own.

Skarr brushed his wing against his skull, silencing public thoughts. Now, he was just communicating with me.

[Fair. Don't want the others to hear that you secretly approve me joining your team?] I quipped.

An unpreened feather slowly slid out of place on the silver avian, sharper than the keenest blade, and dripping with dark, fowl venom. [I believe individuals such as yourself should be euthanized for the good of society.]

The metaphor of the poison dripping down his wings hit a bit too close to home, and shook me down to my core. [That'sâ€|rather extreme.]

[Your actions were 'rather extreme'. Should we not respond in kind?]

[So much for 'forgive and forget', right?]

[I don't claim my actions are right, only that they are justified.] Skarr thrust his wing forward, and I dodged out of the way, smacking him with my tail. He crashed into the dirt, grimaced, and pushed himself off with a wing. Electricity bounded down his form as he crumpled again, and I grinned as my power binded to his muscles, temporarily giving him a minor form of paralysis.

[You're going to have to do better than that, bird. If you're so keen on my death, you may want to post-pone it a few days, at least until after the Elite four.] I mocked. [It looks like you may need me.]

[Pain makes you stronger. Lack of pain cripples you. Calm winds make for poor endurance.]

[What-] I tried to retort, but I cringed as a wave of nausea and cold overcame me, causing me to double over. Something purple dribbled

down my face, and onto my paw.

\_He hit me. That bastard hit me, and I didn't even feel it.\_

The feeling faded, though I felt weaker than before. The Skarmory stood cautiously, healing himself as he watched me grow weaker.

[You're stronger than this!] I screamed, sending a stream of electricity into the bird-shaped lightning rod. He didn't even attempt to dodge, and took the entire bolt. His healing powers flickered, but remained active. [Why won't you fight me!?!]

[I don't need to be fight you to win.] Skarr shrugged, watching with cool indifference as I fought another wave of poison. [I just need to outlast you.]

[T-this isn't the goal of this! Understanding, \_empathyâ€¦\_]

[I understand you perfectly fine.] Skarr blinked slowly, his eyes full of scorn and judgment. I let another burst of electricity out, frying the bird, but to no avail. His burned feathers restored themselves in a second, with a pristine, polished glow. [Resisting will only make you look more pathetic to the others.]

[I refuse to give up! I refuse to fall! Until my last breath, I will fight you to make you understand!] I growled, sending out another blast of lightning. Skarr winced and took it, but his healing energy shattered as his paralysis took hold, preventing him from curing himself properly. I pressed my advantage, shocking him further and harder than before. Within a moment, his healing sphere was back. We were once again at a standstill; he healed all the damage I dealt, but he couldn't heal that first thunderbolt. As a result, and despite his constant healing, he was still quite wounded.

[How ironic that fortune favors the villain!] Skarr spat, healing himself as much as he could. His blackened feathers now remained blackened, but he refused to grow any worse despite my attempts to shock him into unconsciousness. [Fall, damn you! I can stand like this for all eternity, but you have a finite amount of time before the poison takes hold, and renders you blind to the world! Surrender!]

[I'm willing to bet I can withstand your toxins longer than you can stave off your paralysis!]

Skarr wincing as jolts of electricity binded his muscles, yet he refused their crying plea to lock in place. At last it was too much, and his muscles all cramped at once, giving way to my last bolt of electricity. He fell to the floor, blackened and defeated.

[You may have bested my body, but you will never best my mind. I will never see you as anything but an adversary!] He spat, cringing on the floor as his muscles convulsed.

[I could help you win. I'm strong. Powerful. Skilled. You could use someone like me.]

[And use we may.] he croaked. [But though you may fight by our side, you will never be our friend.]



\* \* \*

><p>(Mew POV)<p>

[I don't quite see why this is necessary.] I giggled. [Honestly, I never even knew you before we met in the cavern. I feel only love towards you, like I do all my creations.]

[You didn't create me.] Oxygen bristled.

[Well, not \_directly.\_]

Oxygen frowned, coiling his tail. [Do you believe I can be an asset?]

[I don't believe your power was ever in question. Your trustworthiness, perhaps, and perhaps your capacity for logic.]

Oxygen processed this. [Did you just call me stupid?]

[No.] I smirked. [Why would you think that?]

Faster than I could see, his tail flung into my stomach and electrocuted the breath out of my lungs. I cringed, floating to the side to avoid further assault. Electricity coiled around me, binding to my muscles just like Skarr.

[Arrogance is why gods fall.] Oxygen smirked, coiling his tail and waiting for another opening.

[Arrogance is why mortals \_die.\_] I growled. Electricity coiled around \_his \_muscles as well, binding him and locking up his joints. He screamed, more in surprise than pain.

[W-what have you done!? I-I can't be paralyzed!] he yelped, attempting to rid himself of the pesky electricity, but only managing to move in a jerky, twisting motion.

[And here I thought you wanted empathy.] I gave a cruel smile, extending my hand as a jet of flame engulfed the muscle-locked Raichu. He screamed, unable to dodge as the flames fried him alive.

He limped out of the fire, collapsing in the grass in a show of surrender. I floated over casually, wincing as my body twitched and spasmed.

[Iâ€¦I don't understandâ€¦] He gulped, his fur raw and singed.

[We know.]

\* \* \*

><p>(Static POV)<p>

[I don't want to do this.]

[You don't have to if you don't want to, Static.] Josh gave me a

reassuring nod.

[Please. Just, like, to get our emotions \_out there. \_For you to see what I'm capable of.] Oxygen pleaded.

I shivered. [â€|Dude. Not to be an ass or anything, but I \_know \_what you're capable of.]

Oxygen swallowed hard, and looked away.

[Plus, like, I support you joining us. What are you trying to prove?]

[â€|I don't know. Not that I'm worthy of this, butâ€|that it's worth your guys' time. That I won't backstab you half-way through the Elite Four and quit or something. That my reasons are good, and that I've really changed.]

[You don't have to convince me. I believe you.]

[You're lying.] Oxygen almost \_pouted, \_his paws curled at his sides.

[Noâ€|I'm really not.]

[I almost \_killed \_you! Twice!]

[Honestly, I barely remember it.] I winced. [I remember hurting and floating in the ocean, but that's kind of it. I don't have trouble forgiving you because I don't really \_care. \_I was more worried about Josh not having a good time at the battle park then I was concerned with you.]

[Staticâ€|] Josh sighed, with some trace of melancholy and regret. I smiled at him, and he seemed sated for the moment.

[I was upset because I was the victim, but now that I'm notâ€|] I raised my paws in a shrug. [I don't really care about you. I don't really care if you want to go help some charity somewhere, or you're trying to better yourself. I just want to beat the Elite Four with Josh and the others, and live in the Battle Park with Wiggly, fighting every day and living up high. If you can help us get there, then hop aboard.]

Oxygen tried to digest what I had said, but in the end he simply shook his head. [Iâ€|I don't believe someone could just forgive what I did so easily.]

I didn't really know what to say. Josh was always the one that gave the speeches, and here I just kinda feeling lost. I didn't know what to say to make him feel better â€" did I even want to make him feel better? â€" and I just stood in the meadow feeling useless as the sun slowly dipped in the sky.

[Okay, then.] Josh announced. [What is the consensus then? How does everyone feel about bringing Overd-] Josh frowned, and put a hand to his lips. [Sorry. Bringing \_Oxygen\_ with us tomorrow?]

[What Static says is Law. It was his pain; he decides.] Skarr spoke, surprising me. The others nodded, and turned to me.

[Sure. We need all the help we can get.] I extended my paw, waiting for a handshake. What I got was a hug, full force, crushing in intensity and admiration.

"Tâ€|thank youâ€|" Oxygen chocked, his voice cracking as he held me in the embrace. [I-I know I don't deserve it, but-]

[Earn it, then.] I grinned. [Beat the Elite Four with us at your side, and prove to us that you've changed.]

Oxygen wiped his snout with a paw, and with the other smashed my paw in a fist-bump. [You got it, man. Next stop, the top.]

\* \* \*

><p>Every step. Every battle, every trial, every victory and every defeat lead up to this moment. I shivered, overwhelmed.<p>

[You ready?] Static shook with excitement, standing on my shoulder and holding my hair for balance. The others stood at my side, each giddy with anticipation.

[Yeah.] I answered, stepping through the plastic red line. \_I was now in the Elite Four arena\_. The guard gave a slow, approving nod, and I giggled like a school child in response.

He smiled politely. "Please don't melt the ice."

"Sorry?"

"You'll understand soon, sir." He motioned to the open doorway ahead. Grinning a huge, ridiculous grin, I walked inside.

The temperature dropped drastically as we walked into the room. Ice glistened off the floor and the walls, meshing into one another in a smooth, near-transparent sheet.

My breath materialized before me, and I zipped up my jacket. [Skarr, any way you can see above that wall?]

[Iâ€|I don't think it \_ends.\_] Skarr shivered. [I think it just melds into the ceiling.]

Nova tugged on my jeans. [I could blast a hole!]

[Valid idea, but the guard just-]

[It could be a test!] Nova chirped. [Just to see how willing you are to abide by meaningless rules?]

[Trueâ€|] I relented. [Still, I would prefer to get through this without breaking it. We'll save that for our last resort, all right?]

[Okay.]

I wasn't the only one shivering. Static clung to me harshly, unaccustomed to such fierce cold. Oxygen was likely also suffering, yet he simply grit his teeth and forged onward. Skarr wrapped his

wings around himself. Myst simply stood close to Nova, who appeared to be fairing the best of all of us.

[It branches.] Oxygen spat. I turned the corner, and sure enough, the path split in two. Even worse, I noticed that further down the right path, it split again.

[It's a maze.] Skarr groaned, rubbing his wings together for warmth.

[I could scout ahead, if you would like.] Myst offered.

[Thank you Myst, but I would prefer if we stay together.]

She shrugged. [As you wish.]

[In fact, there's no reason you all should suffer through this.] I continued. [I'm more than capable of figuring this out for myself, and you all should be at your peak for the battles ahead.]

[You'll freeze!] Nova squeaked.

[Well, how are you fairing Nova?]

[I'm a bit cold, I guess?] He gave me a concerned pout.

[Nova and yourself should traverse this maze.] Myst announced. [He can keep you warm. The rest of us should wait until we're needed to strike.]

[Any objections?] No one spoke up. [Okay then. Wish us luck.]

[Luck.] Static frowned, staring at his Pok  ball with a touch of regret. [Be careful, all right?]

[Will do.] I returned everyone but Nova to their Pok  balls. [Hey Nova, mental puzzle. Which direction would you go?]

Nova stared into the icy path for a moment before shrugging. [Left, I guess?]

[Why?]

[  |To make a choice? I don't know. Unless we could see the entirety of the maze, or we knew the layout beforehand, each way is equally likely to be the right one. There's no way to know.]

[There is one way.] I smirked, taking the left path.

[Oh? How?] Nova bounced up behind me, breathing a small burst of fire to keep us warm.

[If you stick to one wall of a maze you're bound to reach the end. Well, \_eventually.\_]

[What do you mean?]

[If we always choose one direction   " in this case left   " we'll eventually reach the end. It's just how mazes are constructed.]

Nova frowned. [I don't understand.]

[I'll show you a picture of what I mean later. For now, just trust me, okay?]

[Okay!]

Nova's flame helped, but after walking for some time I stopped noticing the chill. First sign of frostbite. I frowned, checking my hands every so often and rubbing them together to stay warm. [How are you doing, Nova?] I asked, both to ensure his safety and to keep up conversation.

[Good. My wings kind of hurt, though.] He winced, breathing a small gout of flame for my benefit.

[Wings? Because of the cold?]

[No, because of the walls. I use to walk with them extended to kind of shield you from the cold a bit, but now the walls are too narrow, so I have to walk with them half-open.] He frowned, bending sideways to extend one at full extension, then did the same to the other wing. [They're cramping a bit.]

I thought for a moment, rubbing my hands together. [Hmmm, perhaps if you walked sideways-]

\_Wait. Why was he able to walk with his wings fully extended then, and not now?\_

Nova turned his head, confused. [What's wrong, Josh?]

This is not good. [â€|I think the maze is shrinking.]

[I don't think so, I think we just took a more narrow passage.]

I bit my lip. [I think you're right, but just to make sure, I'm going to make a scuff mark in the ice next to the wall. We'll stay here for a second, and make sure the scuff mark is the same distance, just to make sure.]

Nova nodded. [Good thinking!]

[No. If you're right I'm wasting time, and if I'm right, we're wasting time \_getting crushed.\_ The idea is awful, I just can't think of a better one.]

[It's still a good idea.] Nova encouraged me with a pat of his wing. He scratched a thin line in the ice with his claws, and we watched the wall patiently.

To our mutual horror, the wall crept up, and overtook the line.

[\_Shit.\_] I cursed, both mentally and orally, grabbing Nova by the paw and racing down the maze.

Nova squealed behind me, his warmth forgotten as I raced through the freezing maze. [Wait! Which way are we going to go!?!]

[Left! Always left!]

[But I thought that only worked if we had time!]

I grit my teeth. [â€|You're right, but I don't have a better solution!]

The walls moved faster now, and I could see their physical progress. I had never been claustrophobic before, but I now had a keen sense of what they felt when they described 'the walls closing in'. I ran as fast as I could down a curving passageway, with Nova trailing behind.

I almost smashed into it. Dead end. I whirled around to see a terrified Nova, looking at me with horror. The walls pressed into my shoulders, and my heart raced inside my chest.

My mind whirled with thoughts. [Nova! I'm going to return you to your ball. Should I die, the walls might not close completely, leaving you and the others unharmed!]

Nova screamed something in his normal voice, forgoing the poke speak completely in a look of horror. I had seconds. The wall crunched into my shoulders, and I turned sideways to gain precious, precious time. I reached into my belt and pulled out his PokÃ©ball.

The floor gave way. I was suddenly in freefall, with a wide-eyed Nova diving after me. We had never flown before, and he caught me with his arms instead of his back. He shielded me suddenly with his wings, and we crashed against something hard and unforgiving.

\* \* \*

><p>I groaned. [â€|are you alright?]<p>

Nova stood up, dusting himself off. [I'm okay. Did I do alright? I've never tried to fly with anyone beforeâ€|]

[You were great.] I bit my tongue, trying to not let the pain influence my thoughts. [Thank you.]

"Fancy flying, trainer." Someone scoffed. I winced and stood, taking in the room. Similar to the cerulean gym, the entire thing was a large pool of water. Land trimmed the edges, and two icebergs floated on either side, hinting at the frigid temperature of the water. The walls looked cave-like, sparkling with ice and precious gems, with stalagmites of ice hanging precariously from the ceiling.

"Funny." I scowled. "Does the floor only release in certain spots, or was it rigged to give at a moment of sacrifice?"

The woman smirked. Her hair was a deep maroon, which complemented her dark, almost black swimsuit. She had large, thin framed glasses, which carried an aura of confidence and knowledge as she pushed them up her thin nose. "They trigger when you're about to die. It isn't a test at all â€" each trial is a lesson, designed by each member of the Elite Four."

"What lesson could that possibly teach?" I fumed. "The maze was too

large to transverse logically, and with the introduction the aspect of death so close to the Cave, people will instantly assume it's real! What's the goal â€" to run chaotically through it until your heart fails or you get crushed to death!?"

"Calmness, under pressure." The woman cocked her head in a mock bow. "Now â€" to whom do I have the honor of battling?"

"My name is Josh Karren." I stood fiercely with my arms at my sides, ignoring the extreme cold. I knew that everything in the Elite four was kept under the strictest confidence, and I had no fear of my identity being discovered. Likewise, the identity of the Elite Four and the champion especially were all hidden. "What is your name, if I may?"

"I am Lorelei, First Master of the Elite Four." She purred. "I represent wisdom and focus. I believe that all things can be discovered through knowledge and devotion."

"Hmmm." I put my hands in my pockets, trying to keep some semblance of warmth. "I assumed your ideals would pertain to ice, or at least water."

"The environment we battle in, and the types of PokÃ©mon I choose are merely means to an end." Lorelei flicked a strand of hair that had gotten out of place. "Water types are the most stable PokÃ©mon; all of their statistics such as defense, special attack, and speed are all equivalent. This means they have no true weaknesses, but also no strengths." She smiled, the light glimmering off the ice and shining off her glasses. "Ice, however, is extremely powerful, but also extremely frail. Combining the two is simply logical â€" power without weakness."

"Yet you are only the First Master of Five." I countered. "If this were true, wouldn't you be the champion?"

"My ideals are correct, my execution and personal abilities are what need refining." She bowed. "However, when you lose to me, you will have the honor of knowing that you lose to Lorelei â€" First Master of the Elite Four, and Future Champion of Kanto."

I grinned. "I'll break through your false ideals like ice."

"Go, Dewgong. Show him the power of the Northern Seas!"

"Go, Static! Show her the weakness of trusting a single element!"

### 30. Earth Bender

\_Go time.\_

Everything was covered in ice, and it was cold as hell. Still, blood pumped through my heart, and I was ready for any challenge. There was water everywhere, and I saw a weird seal-thing peeking out from under an iceberg. It looked like a mix between a stunted unicorn and a mole, and sounded just as pleasant.

[Won't you join me in the water?] It hummed slowly, almost stupidly.

[It feels fantastic, I promise. Warm, almost tropical.]

I stuck out my tongue. [Why don't you join me on land, so I can shock the bejesus out of you easier, and so you'll reverse-drown?]

[I breathe air, you ignorant rat.]

[Then why do you live in water? That's stupid.]

Both of our trainers were waiting for the other to give an order. Attacking was simple and fairly straightforward, but once it was executed it was difficult to stop. Sometimes, choosing to defend early was a better option, as it gave the opportunity to counterattack. All of this sounded like garbage to me, and I would have normally ignored it, but given the fact that the stupid seal-thing was under an iceberg I couldn't exactly use Fake Out right off the bat like I would like.

[Wait for a move.] Josh said. [If she's far away, Thunderbolt, and if she's close, Brick Break.]

[Why wouldn't I use Thun-, wait, she? How the hellâ€|?]

[Size of the horn.]

[Oh, okay. So, like, smaller horns are females?]

[Actually, the reverse is true. While males use it to fence and determine mates, females actually have the longer horns, for breaking through ice and for protecting the young.]

[That's stupid.]

Josh rolled his eyes. [Just focus.]

The trainer and Josh looked like they were speaking. I grumbled impatiently. After a moment, Lorelei flicked her wrist at the Dewgong and suddenly it moved, darting through the water with ridiculous speed. It crashed into my iceberg, and it cracked in half. I stumbled, and the seal-thing took the opportunity to leap out of the water straight at me.

Luckily I didn't have to be standing to attack.

"Chaaa!" I screamed, socking it in the face as it attempted a Body Slam. It rolled over and flopped on top of me, crushing the breath out me with its fat. I snorted and punched it again, and to my surprise it stopped moving.

I punched it once more for good measure, and snaked my way out from under the white blob.

Josh nodded. [Good. How are you feeling?]

[â€|disgusted, but health-wise I'm fine.]

[Okay. Keep me updated on your health â€" I could only buy so many revives, and we're not allowed to go to PokÃ©Centers halfway through this. Healing you after battle is easy, but reviving you is harder.]



[Got it.]

The girl trainer frowned, returning the seal-thing to her Pokéball, then threw out another. And boy, I was in for it if I thought the seal thing looked dumb.

"Sloowwwwâ€¦!" the Slowbro moaned, its eyes staring forward vacantly.

[Seriously?] I laughed at the drooling pink Pokémon.

[Scoff at me if you must, but I'm not choosy when it comes to hosts. Taste the power of our combined force!] It's tail had eyes and a Pokespeak, and spoke venomously as a bolt of pink energy shot out of the Slowbro's paw.

[Thunderbolt! Don't waste your moves on anything else!] Josh ordered. I ducked after the first bolt (was that Psychic? Seriously?) and retaliated with a bolt of my own. It took the hit in stride and sent another purple bolt at my feet.

[Take the hit!] Josh warned. [Don't jump or-]

It was too late, and I leapt forward to avoid the blow, right into the icy waters. I nearly froze on impact, my muscles tensing and begging for relief from the torturous cold.

[Shit!] Josh cursed. [Static, can you get back up?]

[I'm f-f-fine!] I screamed back, my head breaking from the waves. The Slowbro shot another purple blast, catching me and dunking me back under the surface.

[If you have enough air, swim to the other side!]

I snarled bubbles underwater, quickly kicking and pushing the water out of my way. I finally reached the other side, and scurried back onto the iceberg and shaking my coat free of the arctic water.

[He's just going to try the same strategy! Make sure you have sure footing!]

[I'm standing on ice!] I growled, sending another bolt of electricity at the Slowbro, which he easily dodged. I was too far away to get a good shot.

[Just try to get a secure a foothold as you can.]

An idea slowly hatched in my mind. A stupid, impossible, awesome idea.

\_I can secure a foothold, alright.\_

"Sloowwwwâ€¦!" the Slowbro gurgled, filling his mouth with water right before he spat it back. I tensed, muscles coiled, ready to put my plan into action.

[Perish!] The Slowbro's tail commanded, spraying a frigid blue burst at my little iceberg. I ran and jumped high off the island,

kicked against the wall, and dove onto the Slowbro's iceberg. The female trainer blinked in disbelief as I punched the Slowbro in its stupid face, my fist trailing with the electricity from my checks. He reeled from my blow and stumbled into the water, kicking off and sinking deep into the pool.

[Argh!] I growled. [Josh, what do I do?]

[Can you just shock the water as a collective? The electricity will likely be diffused, but it'll still get some damage on him.]

I tensed, sending a burst of electricity into the pool. The Slowbro was too deep now, and I couldn't really tell if it hurt him or not. I frowned, sending another burst into the pool. Couldn't hurt, right?

The Slowbro burst from the waves behind me, and smashed me with his clubbed paw. I flew off the iceberg, and once again fell into the icy waves, except I wasn't cold anymore.

No. Now I was pissed.

"Chaaa!" I screamed, diving towards the Slowbro. He dodged too slowly, and I latched onto the tail. It gave a look of frightened bewilderment as I bit onto the end, sending a stream of electricity into it as it tried to swim away. It kicked me hard in the face and I nearly blacked out, but I didn't let go. At last it stopped moving, and I was able to swim to the surface, shivering and badly damaged. Under normal circumstances I would banter with Josh about how I could go 'one more fight', but I knew I was all but down for the count. The water was freezing, and I could barely float.

[Great job, man.]

[Damn r-right.] I smirked, finding the bliss of status.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

Options. Nova was completely out of the question, of course. Skarr wouldn't be the best match despite his steel typing, simply because flying is also weak to ice. Myst is strong, but she is also a glass cannon, and I didn't want to send her out without a clear advantage.

Mew was a good option, but second best. Oxygen would be perfect here, as he would have a clear advantage, and he was use to treacherous terrain. This was a good a time as any " either he succeeded and won us this match, or he lost, and I had Mew to back him up. I nodded, my choice made.

"Go, Oxygen!"

\* \* \*

><p>(Oxygen POV)<p>

\_How long have I been out?\_

I glanced warily at my surroundings, still covered in that annoying, biting ice. I disliked being confined in that ball, having my orientation of time distorted by stasis, but such was the price of teamwork.

"Go, Lapras!" a woman cried, standing on a sliver of land across from me. I stood on a fraction of a floating bit of ice, next to its twin. Another iceberg floated next to a behemoth of a Pokémon, nearly the size of the iceberg itself. Apparently, I was in a battle.

[Double Team, then Thunderbolt!] the trainer named Josh ordered. I disliked the way he commanded me, but I grit my teeth and obeyed. This was temporary, after all.

I focused, and tore myself in two, making sure to duplicate my shadow along with my form. It was a mistake I only made once.

The sea monster shot a beam of ice at our feet, and I willed myself and my clone to avoid it. The illusion was always more compelling if it too had a sense of self-preservation.

"Rai!" I shouted, leaping forward with my powerful legs, and grabbing hold of one of the creatures' large spines. The creature's neck snapped backwards, and glared at me with—

such, odd eyes.

[Oxygen, focus!]

They were green and crisp, just like sunlight, bathed in the sea of dust. Dripping water from curved, politely bowed leaves, allowing passage into bright darkness. I remembered the taste of pear—a treat, given to me by a man, long ago. A man forgotten, or attempted to be. Why had he shown such kindness, then such disregard? The taste of pear, greenness, and pure, soured and tainted by neglect and confusion.

\_Confusion.\_

I bit my tongue hard, trying to regain my sense of clarity. I felt cold, hard water surrounding me, but was this too the result of a mind hazed by surrealism? I tasted pear. Why had he been so kind? He had never fed me before, and I had never counted on the kindness of strangers. I ate rats, and drank putrid water dripping from sewers at my lowest. Grotesque water, green with—no, it wasn't green. Green was fresh, golden, and pure, like the pear. Where was I?

[Focus! He's got you in the water!]

I flailed, smashing my tail into something that felt satisfactory. I was in a field, and I was warm, and happy. Content, yet there were no pears here, and no neglectful trainers. I was with friends—no, I was with family. Lush, green grass, green like purity, sunlight, and warmth, green like youth, generosity, and kindness. Green like the eyes I would never have, my own cursed with scorn and rejection, with the pain of mortality and the weight of—

I gasped for air, choking with water. The monster lay defeated, and I was soaked with freezing water. I noticed I was damaged, but not severely. I was lucid again, but I still tasted pear on my tongue,

reminiscent of a memory long forgotten.

[Are you alright, Oxygen?] Josh called out, with a hint of something. It wasn't sarcasm, or lack of faith. It wasn't belittling, or cruel. It was

concern?

I tried to smile, unused to the gesture. [I'm alright. Thank you] Josh.]

[Do you think you can go another round?]

I stretched, and assessed my wounds. I felt the biting cold, but I also felt a sense of warmth I hadn't felt in a long time. A sense of promise, and a sense of destiny.

[Absolutely.] I smirked, pounding my fist into its twin. [Let them come.]

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

I was impressed.

Oxygen had dispatched the subsequent Cloyster with ease, and just destroyed Lorelei's Jynx. Besides the fight with the Lapris, he was never even struck. Grudgingly impressed, I returned him to his Pokéball.

I nodded to Lorelei, eager to continue and get out of this cold. "Good battle."

"Mmmm." Lorelei gave a small, bored shrug. "I've had better."

\_You're lost. How have you had better?\_

Lorelei motioned to a section of the cave wall. "Anyway, the path continues here. Goodbye."

The wall opened up slightly, giving way to a warm narrow path.

\_Did she mean more decisive? A better learning opportunity for her?\_

My chilled body rebelled against my mind for wanting to stay a moment longer, but my curiosity was too much to bear. I whirled around once again to face Lorelei. "What did you mean when you said 'you've had better'?"

She leaned back in thought. "When fighting more experienced trainers, we adopt a certain mindset. A way of predicting their moves and countering appropriately. When fighting more novice opponents, it occasionally throws our game, simply because we aren't use to such barbaric tactics."

\_What.\_

"Soâ€¦you lost because I sent out an electric type and you \_didn't expect me to press my advantage?"

"Essentially. I thought it was a ploy; you would switch into a water type and heal yourself, or perhaps you had an item that would power up your PokÃ©mon if it were hit with an ice-type attack. Throwing out an electric type simply to counter my water type isâ€¦very one-dimensional thinking, and I figured you would be capable of more than that, so I fought accordingly." Lorelei pushed her glasses up her nose. "But, I suppose I was mistaken."

\_Soâ€¦I fought poorly and won because I was a worse trainer than you pictured me to be?\_

I rejected the stray thought, and crunched my face with disbelief. "Okay. Thank you, I suppose. I'll take my leave now."

Lorelei shrugged noncommittally. "Best of luck, trainer."

I took my first step down the torch-lit cave path. \_Warmth! \_Feeling returned to my hands and feet, along with the pins and needles feeling race across my arms. I gave a contented sigh and unzipped my jacket.

[So. I realize I may be a bit of a hypocrite here, but that has to be some of the most backwards, convoluted logic I have ever had the displeasure of witnessing.]

I looked around, confused of the source of the stray thought. A musical chuckle filled the air, and once again I remembered Mew, strapped to my arm.

[Forget about me so soon, did you Josh?] Mew gave a playful grin.

"Sorry, you're quiet sometimes, and I'm use to my watch being there. I don't think about it twice."

[Quite fine, quite fine.]

"So you heard my conversation with Lorelei?" I asked, continuing down the spiraling dirt path.

[Indeed. Did you know that, according to the statistics of her PokÃ©mon and those of Static and Overdose, she only had a six chance of success? Also, that is defining 'success' as knocking out both Static and Overdose, not the other four members of our team, myself included.]

I shook my head, still baffled. "I'm justâ€¦I understand the premise of out-predicting your opponents, but after I've used the same strategy to knock out one or two of her PokÃ©mon, she didn't realize I would to the same thing to the other three?"

[It's illogical.]

"And she's a member of the Elite Four! How could she not-"

[\_First \_Master.] Mew interrupted.

"So?"

[Maybe that symbolizes something. She obviously has a lot of intrinsic talent yet, and perhaps some practical application, but \_something \_prevents her from becoming more of a success than she already is. The realization of her own logical fallacies, overthinking simple battle strategies?]

"Hmmm. I hadn't considered that." The dirt trail ended abruptly, and a giant steel wall stood in my way. There were grates on both sides, \_almost \_big enough for me to fit through, but not quite. I could see the other side of the trail continue from there.

A puzzleâ€|

[Anyway, don't let it get you down.]

"Thanks." I responded automatically, my mind preoccupied with this new challenge. "Hey Mew, want check this out real quick?"

In a display that would give me nightmares for years to come, a single eyeball stalk arose from the watch and looked forward. [Interesting. Think you could fit through the grates?]

Still trying to preserve the eggs I had consumed that morning, I simply closed my mouth and elected to use the pokespeak. [N-no. I think I'm slightly too large. This would be easy for you and the others â€" the light can actually penetrate through thin barriers like this, but I can't go inside a PokÃ©ball.] I frowned, nausea gone in favor of quiet contemplation.

Mew uncoiled from my wrist and turned back into his original form, flitting inside and out of the grate with grace. [If your body mass was twenty-three percent less, you could fit through these gates. The human body is surprisingly malleable.]

"But since I can't loseâ€|" I did some quick calculations in my head to amuse Mew. "Thirty-two point two pounds comfortably in an instant, we need to figure out another way across."

Mew glanced at me warily, circling me while his eyes ran up and down my form.

"W-what are you doing?"

[You're being a bitâ€|\_generous, \_aren't you? When did you last attempt to calculate your mass?]

"Stay focused." I growled. Mew relented and stared at the gate.

[This may be more effective if we include the others.]

"Already on it." I nodded, PokÃ©balls in hand.

\* \* \*

><p>[This wall is stupid.] Static growled. We had been spitballing ideas for the last twenty minutes, his being to simply dig under it. It met with little success, to which he suggested digging around the

wall itself, which also failed to work.<p>

[I realize I'm not exactly making a good case for fire-types \_not \_being pyromaniacs todayâ€|] Nova began, [But why don't we just blast a hole through it? Yes it wasn't the solution last time, but it also could've saved us from being crushed, or at least pseudo-crushed. It's steel, right? I can burn that, right?]

I shrugged. [Honestly, I have no idea. I'm not sure how hot a steel wall has to get before it melts, or breaks, or whatever steel does once it reaches whatever temperature your breath would have.]

Mew hummed a happy little note. [I could also assist him.]

[Why don't we all?] Overdose interjected. [Let's all blast this wall to bits.]

I raised up my hand. [Well, wait. I'm worried about other special attacks reflecting off.]

Skarr scratched one wing in its twin. [Why don't we stand on one side of the room, and shoot our attacks at an angle, so if it does reflect it bounces off to the other side?]

I didn't have a counter argument, so I shrugged and relented. Everyone was organized in moments, with Oxygen, Nova, and Mew in the front, and Myst and Static in the back. Skarr was standing by me, mostly for moral support.

[Go!] I commanded. An explosion of power blinded me momentarily as Oxygen's hyperbeam went off in conjunction with two Flamethrowers, one Thunderbolt, and one Dark Pulse. Once the cave stopped shaking, I blinked my eyes a few times and allowed the dust to settle.

The wall was still very much intact.

[Dammit!] Static cursed, kicking the wall. He screamed and jumped back, clutching his paw. [AAUUUGH, it's hot!]

[So it retains the heatâ€|] I considered, as Static bounced comically around the room.

[I don't think it's nearly hot enough to melt.] Myst countered.

[You're probably right.] I frowned. [Perhaps the ceiling? Skarr, could you-?]

[On it.]

Skarr flew up and scratched his beak against the ceiling, with limited results.

For the next half-hour, we continued trying different techniques, all without success. I wasn't surprised at the challenge itself, but I \_was \_surprised at Oxygen's reaction. Whereas Static was annoyed at the challenge and for the person that created it, Oxygen seemed legitimately upset at the wall itself.

[â€|gonna beat the shit out of this stupid, damn wallâ€|] Oxygen

mumbled, gritting his teeth as yet another plan failed â€" digging out the steel wall itself from the resulting wall.

[Do you have a better idea?] Skarr growled at Oxygen.

[No! If I had an idea, do you think we wouldn't be testing it?] He screamed. Everyone took a step back, startled at his outcry. [What?] He shouted, his angry demeanor turning more to that of fear. [You guys are pissed too! Don't antago-whatever me just because I'm as mad as you guys!]

[Justâ€¦|just calm down.] Static raised his paws in defense.

[\_Don't tell me to calm down!\_ I'm fine, I'm just mad about this stupid-ass wall! And now you are all scared I'm going to go all 'crazy Over-Dose' because I'm \_showing a damn emotion!\_] His face began to turn red, as he faced the wall. [I forgot, I'm just supposed to be the silent guy, right? God forbid I add something to the conversation, or show that I'm not just a blank face! Make you guys scared of me again! STUPID WALL!] He reeled back, and smashed his fist against the wall as hard as he possibly could.

It dented.

Oxygen blinked for a moment, then inspected the wall a bit closer. [Wait. Did I do that?]

[That could have been from the collective beam.] Skarr pointed out.

[Oxygen, could you punch it again please?] I asked.

Oxygen shrugged and punched it a second time, denting it further. A grin spread across his face as he punched it a third time, then a fourth, then finally tearing through to the other side. With a few more well placed smacks, he had created a whole big enough for us all to fit through.

[Hah.] Oxygen grinned, panting. [Useful after all.]

\* \* \*

><p>He was <em>massive.<em>

I'm a pretty tall guy myself, but I was nothing compared to this hulking mass of steroids. He wore a thin black jacket with nothing underneath, showing off his massive, tanned shoulders, and flat, practically chiseled abs. He stood above me by at least a foot, and had an aura of intensity about him, made even clearer by the fiercely tied black belt around his waist.

The room we had just entered was little more than a large dirt circle, with a much higher ceiling than most. The man stood in the center, cracking his knuckles as we approached, and showing off weighted wristbands on each hand. "Ah, at last, you've arrived. It's been ages since the last contender."

"My name is Josh Karren." I declared, more boldly than I felt.

"Well met." The large man nodded. "My name is Bruno; I am the Second



Master of Five. Tell me " what did you think of my puzzle?"

I bit my lip. "Um. Honestly, I'm not sure I understood it." I awaited a lecture, or at least a small glare of dissatisfaction, but what I received was a rich chuckle from the muscular man.

"Hah. No, rest assured Josh Karren, my lesson was a difficult one. The wall is meant to only yield to extreme physical force; nothing else. Any other solution is incorrect."

"So simply relying on brute strength?"

Bruno furrowed his brow. "Is it so wrong? In my profession, I was laughed at for choosing the types I choose " fighting and rock, for their power and sturdiness, respectively. I was told of their many weaknesses, and that I was a thick-skulled fool whose vanity prevented me from making objective choices about the Pok mon I raised.

"I do not claim that brute strength is the answer to all puzzles, but why not some? People speak of the mind and the body as if they two are separate, and that the mind is always the superior force. I deny this claim " I believe the body and mind are one, and only by utilizing all of the elements of yourself do you become whole, and the best person you can be."

I meditated on the thought for a moment.

"You have a powerful mind." Bruno smirked. I shot him an inquisitive look. "You do not believe what I say, yet you choose to think of it. Such is the mark of maturity."

I smiled at the complement. "I choose to believe the two are separate, and that my body is simply the vessel for my mind. If I am wrong and you are right, tell me: why are you only the Second Master of Five?"

The bulky man gave a sad smile. "Even in this, I am not perfect. I believe if I train and work hard enough, my Pok mon and I will succeed. It will be an honor to battle you, Josh Karren, and put my convictions to the test."

"Likewise." I bowed, and drew Skarr's pokeball.

\* \* \*

><p>(Skarr POV)<p>

The ground rumbled under the arena as an enormous rock formation judged out the ground, curling and twisting of its own accord. I flew more than thirty feet high, yet the formation continued growing until it matched my height. Two massive white eyes stuck out from the stone, along with a slow, cruel smile.

"Come to die, little bird?" it laughed, stone grinding on stone as it smashing me back down to the earth with its enormous granite head.

[Skarr!] Josh shouted. [Are you alright? Did you-]

[Got it.] I smirked, nodding at the small trail of purple leaking out of the Onix' cheek.

The Onix noticed this, and scoffed. [You think this will slow me? I am \_earth.\_ I am the ever moving, patient rock! Your tricks are nothing!] The Onix roared, and the ceiling began to cave. Huge boulders crashed around me, crumpling one of my wings and anchoring me to the ground.

An aura of healing surrounded me as I awaited his next attack, desperately trying to free my wing.

[Little bird, too young to learn to fly.] The Onix smashed his head into me once more, crushing me and sending me into the ground.

['Little bird'? At least I don't emulate dirt.] I spat, continuing to heal myself. [How does it feel to forever be trampled upon? Always underfoot of those who are your betters?]

The Onix roared, crushing me with his skull, once, twice. It had no effect after my healing.

The Onix let out one last roar, shaking the caves with frustration. [You want to just \_stand \_there? FINE! Become one with the earth!] And thenâ€|

I saw something truly amazing.

The thirty foot snake made of solid graniteâ€|

Jumped.

For a moment, the entire gym stood silent. It only got about two feet in the air, but even the Second Master seemed in awe. Then, the moment passed, and it smashed back into the ground. The ground rumbled in pain, crushing and twisting around me. The force was too much â€" the raw power of the attack dented my chest and made my wings all but useless. It would have knocked me out, yetâ€|

â€|I still could move.

[Skarr! Return!] Josh's commanded.

I was exhausted, but somehow still conscious. Though my metal chest dented, it seemed that was not enough to fell me in one strike.

[\_Noâ€|it will fall before I do.]\_ I growled, ignoring Josh's order. I felt Josh's hesitance in my mind, but his trust was greater than his caution.

At last, the Onix collapsed into the dirt. I smirked, fatigued beyond comprehension, yet allowing myself the small pleasure of placing a talon on the beast's unconscious head.

"And you would do well to remember your place." I smirked at the Onix, then nodding to Josh as I was absorbed back into the PokÃ©ball.

\* \* \*

><p>(Mew POV)<p>

It was delightful seeing the Second Master's face as I arose to challenge him. His normal, tanned flesh went white, and his pupils shrunk by nearly thirty-two percent.

"Truly you are a worthy foe." he choked, hesitating at his choice to send out a thin, yet powerful looking Hitmonchan.

Josh just smiled. [Alright, Mew. You have this.]

I hummed, filling the air with a mystic melody.

The Hitmonchan rushed at me. I let him get within about a foot before I stopped in him with my glare. He levitated for a moment before taking the full brunt of my Psystrike, then fell to the floor unconscious.

I giggled.

[Good. How do you feel?] Josh asked.

[Powerful.] I purred. [A shard of my soul has been returned; logic is being restored, and I'm beginning to once again feel whole.]

[Relish it, but stay cautious.]

The large man sent out a second Pok mon, a Hitmonlee, with dark bands around its legs. I raised one of my paws in preparation, and gave another musical laugh. It was too easy    I would ensnare him just like I did the Hitmonlee. Rinse and repeat.

Pain exploded across my chest, and I reeled backwards and smashed my spine against the floor. The Hitmonlee was somehow free, with his foot extended expertly outward. He spun, flipping me back to standing with one leg, and sent me flying in the air with another. I was completely disoriented with his speed, but all it took was one moment of clarity in the chaotic flurry of kicks for me to regain control. I thrust out my paw and crunched it in itself, and the Hitmonlee froze, momentarily immobilized.

\_Let's try this again, shall we?\_

Pink force wracked though the Hitmonlee, and he too fell, defeated, to the floor.

I brushed off my coat, satisfied, yet frustrated.  
[How  ?]

[Fake-out, then Sucker Punch. Deceptive name, given it was with his foot.] Josh frowned.

[But how was he so \_fast\_? All I had to do was raise my-]

[I'll explain later, but for now, just trust me. How are you feeling?]

He had hit me hard. Much harder than I expected. Under normal

circumstances I would ask to stay in, butâ€¦

[Not well.] I grit my teeth at my admission of weakness.

I felt the numbers in Josh's mind warp and bend due to our telepathic connection. I had never felt this from a human before â€" normally they required a device to perform the types of calculations he was doing almost effortlessly. Within mere seconds, Josh frowned.

[If there's another Rock/Ground PokÃ©mon, we're doomed without you. Come to the sidelines, and I'll send Nova out to fight the next PokÃ©mon he sends out â€" hopefully a flying type.]

I nodded obediently.

"Go, Nova!" Josh commanded. Nova unfurled his wings, and roared loudly at the tanned man.

To our horror, the man didn't seem fazed in the least as he sent out his next PokÃ©mon.

"Go, Onix."

And all the color left Josh's face.

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

[Orders, Josh?]

[\_I need timeâ€¦I need timeâ€¦\_] Josh's usually clear and focused mind was muddled with numbers and algorithms. I stood immobilized, without an order. What should I do? Fire seemed stupid against what was obviously a huge rock type, andâ€¦

Wait. Wasn't rock like, \_super bad \_for me?

The Onix shook the stage by its mere presence. It's skin was so dark it was almost black, and its eyes shone red with fury.

[\*\*Survive.\*\*] The order came almost violently, pleadingly. [Don't even try to attack. Just don't get hit.]

"It's been awhile since I've faced your kind." Stone grinded as the words rumbled out his mouth. "They say that the Charizard's blood boils in their veins, and I've always wondered if that rumor was trueâ€¦"

I took a deep breath, calming my mind and easing my fears. "That knowledge requires the wherewithal to strike me, an honor that one as desultory as yourself shall never have."

The Onix' laughter boomed across the stage. "You have the dragon's tongue, boy, but that is all you have inherited. Even the dragon's evanescent existence is nothing compared to the ageless earth!"

I dodged to the side as stone tail smashed against the ground leaving a crater where I once stood. I swirled around, barely dodging another

blow as a boulder the size of a car smashed inches from my skin. I kicked off it and took to the air, blasting the Onix with white hot fire.

"Ha. Ha. Ha." he rumbled, the flames washing over him like water. "The might of dragons indeed."

[Nova! Just a little bit longer â€" you're doing great!]

The Onix swung its tail again, and I narrowly swooped down to avoid getting swiped out of the sky. I saw his strategy too late as a stone fell and crushed me out of the sky, smashing me to the floor. The stone wasn't big â€" maybe half my size â€" but it took more out of me than anything I've felt before. In that one attack, I knew I was almost gone.

The Onix smirked a terrible, stone grin. "And, as shall always be the fate of dragons, they will rise, and they will fall."

Then he fell. All thirty tons of stone collapsed upon me. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to dodge as this monstrosity came to break every bone in my body. I winced, prepared for the pain that never came.

[Return!] Josh ordered, rendering me safe from the world.

### 31. A word with the dead

(Mew POV)

[Hello, friend.]

The Onix before me was larger than most, yet it reeled back when it heard my voice. "C-creator?"

I giggled. [One of many.] I then turned my thoughts towards Josh. [Psystrike, I presume?]

[Good assumption, but Onix have unusually high defense. In this case, it would be better to use Ice Beam.]

[As you prefer.] I shrugged, shooting a beam of pure ice at the gyrating mass of rock. The Onix dodged with expert speed and launched itself at me, twisting and grinding into the dirt. It roared, its mouth wide open, no doubt attempting to clamp its jaws around me. I fired another beam right before it stuck, hitting him perfectly and freezing him in place.

I blinked. A massive, immobilized ice sculpture of an Onix loomed overhead, eyeing me with a mixture of frustration and terror.

[I wasn't even aware that that was a possibility.] I hummed, striking it again. On the third strike the Onix broke free, and promptly fell to the floor, defeated.

The Second Master returned the fainted Onix, then reached for his final Pok  ball. "I detest the dichotomy this represents; the mind and the body should work as one, not be dominated by one or the other."

I smiled. [The body and the mind may work as one, but the mind shall always dominate the body, human named Bruno.]

Bruno frowned, sending out his last PokÃ©mon, even larger than the man himself. The Machop cracked each of its wrists, and pounded his fists into their twins, ready for battle.

Quicker than the eye could travel, he was before me, cracking his palms together, dazing me. He drew back his arm, but this strategy had already been performed once before. I paused for just a moment, causing his counter-attack to fail, then blasted him with opaque, pink energy.

It was over.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

Bruno hung his head. "I am displeased. You have a strong mind, but I believe your skills could be sharpened further with physical training. Having one or the other creates imbalance in something that should be flawless and harmonious."

I bowed. "I shall consider your words. I agree the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive."

Bruno nodded. "That is all I wished to accomplish. I wish you success, Josh Karren. Your path lies below the ground."

I looked inquisitively at the floor. The hole that the Onix' had dug lead into another chamber, one we had not yet explored.

"Thank you, Bruno. It was a pleasure."

"Anytime, my intelligent friend. Visit me, no matter the outcome of your quest. I wish to once again duel you once this journey of yours concludes."

"You have my word." I smiled, lowering myself into the cave.

\* \* \*

><p>[Are you sure this is the right way? I could've sworn-]<p>

[A-absolutely.] I nodded. [Keep to the left; it always works.]

I couldn't help but notice us passing the same stalagmite for the third time.

Nova held his hands together awkwardly. [Joshâ€¦.]

[Don't question him!] Static snapped. [He knows what he's doing.]

Myst frowned. [I'm sure he does, but Nova still has the right to speak up.]

[And] I think something's wrong.] I stopped walking for a moment. [Mew, could you continue down that way, sticking to the left for about five minutes, then come back to us?]

[Certainly.] Mew nodded, then floated off ahead.

Static turned to me. [What are you thinking, Josh?]

[I'm thinking this doesn't make sense. Either this tunnel is changing, or something is distorting our perspective, making us believe-]

[Hello, mortals.] Mew hummed, now behind us.

I cursed. [Either we're unable to stick to once side due to some kind of ailment, or this tunnel is changing as we progress. If it's the first it doesn't matter, as we're unfit to even move, and if it's the latter we're at the complete mercy of whomever is changing the tunnels.]

[Well, left certainly isn't the answer!] Mew cackled behind us.

Myst gave Mew a dirty look. [What are you?]

[Immortal.] Mew grinned a set of brilliant, spiked teeth. [I'll get out eventually, of course. Even in death, I'll just-]

Myst punched Mew in the gut, with black power emanating from her fist. Mew exploded with purple energy, cackling madly as it dispersed.

He fell to the floor, unconscious.

[Possessed.] Myst spat.

[Now what a \_ruuudeee \_way to treat your hosts!] Voices all around us giggled. I crunched my hand into a fist, and motioned my team to bunch together. [We were going to have fun with you! Why ruin our mirth with your despicable sense of \_reason?\_]

[I can see you, you bastards!] Myst hopped up and swung at the air, hitting something and causing it to meld into another burst of purple. [Get away from here!]

[Hahaha! So soon to have us \_leave?\_] A voice creaked inside a wall.

[Vanish! Die! Leave us alone!] Myst demanded, swinging at another and causing it too to disperse.

[As you wish.]

With a violent gust of wind, all the torches went out at once. Even Nova's tail flickered violently for a moment, but stayed firmly lit. I could barely see my hand.

I growled. [Nova, can you breathe a bit of flame ahead of us, so we can see properly?]

[I] I don't think that will help.] Myst whispered. [There's

nothing anymore.]

Nova blew a huge gout of fire. The walls were gone. The cave was gone. We stood on a single gray plane of land, surrounded by black nothingness. After a moment, Nova's fire went out, and we were once again plunged into darkness.

Nova whimpered. Oxygen punched the floor. Static and Skarr stood motionless beside us, and Myst desperately looked around. Mew laid on the floor, senseless.

I took a breath to compose myself. [We're together. That's what matters. No matter what, we-]

A sickening wet, crunch went off behind me. I winced, refusing to look. Nova whined and latched onto my leg, and Static and the other's moved closer to one another.

Oxygen growled, and walked closer to it.

It appeared to be an older woman, terribly mutilated from a long fall. Her bones were shattered and bent, and blood oozed out of her chest. Though her mouth seemed to be twisted into a permanent, silent scream, her eyes seemed calm and collected.

[Should I shock it?] Oxygen asked, frowning at the corpse.

[\_I would rather you didn't.\_] It smiled.

[NOPE.] Static clawed up my arm, and clutched my shoulder with his little arms and legs. [Nope, nope, nope, nope.]

It didn't appear to be advancing. I took one breath to quell the nausea, and another to calm the nerves. Whatever it was, it didn't look aggressive.

[Whatâ€|are you?] I tried to declare, but it came out meek and small.

[\_Left.\_] it grinned, showing off two or three broken, rotted teeth. [\_I am your solution. Will you follow me?\_]

[How can we trust you?]

[\_You can trust whomever you'd like, boy. Trust is not earned; trust is based on faith. Whether you trust someone who has betrayed you in the past, or you distrust someone whom you barely know, this trust is not based on reason.\_]

I frowned. [Can faith not be a hybrid of what you believe to be true, and what you know to be true?]

[\_Knowledge is knowing that you can swim in water. Faith is believing that what you're about to jump into \_is\_ water.\_]

[So then, what is your point, aberration?]

[\_Will you trust me?\_] With its crooked, twisted arms, it pushed itself to a sitting position. [\_You owe me nothing, and I owe you nothing. You have no reason to trust me\_,] Her strange, calm eyes



twinkled. [\_â€|but will you?\_]

[Is this a question of if I am a fool, or if I am inherently trusting?]

[\_Such a quandary is yours to decide, trainer.\_]

I bit my lip, and looked at my team. [Thoughts?]

[NOPE.] Static gulped, still firmly latched on to my shoulder.

[Follow, but never trust.] Myst nodded.

Nova let go of my leg a bit, but still stayed relatively close. [Whatever you think is best.]

Oxygen shrugged.

[We're stuck without help, or unless we find another solution.] Skarr deduced. [I'll break the tie and say follow.]

I turned to the corpse. [Then that is our answer.]

[\_Congratulations, trainer.\_] the corpse stood, it's bones snapping back into their sockets. [\_You have arrived to the Arena of Agatha â€ The Undying Third Master. It is a pleasure-]\_ Her head snapped backwards, and her jaw slid into place. "To meet your acquaintance."

"\_You're \_Agatha?" I jumped back.

"Powers over the dead have their benefits." She smirked. "Next month I'm celebrating my one-hundred and sixtieth birthday. My body still decays from time to time, butâ€|well, nothing is perfect." She grabbed one of her ribs, and cracked it back into place. "What did you think of my Trial?"

I tasted bile. "...overcoming fears is not an entirely new concept for me, and especially at this stage-

"No. Though fear is a concept within my Solutionless Maze, my lesson is to heed the wisdom of others. Even if they are unwise, or different." She smirked.

"Why would I heed the words of the unwise, instead of ignore them?"

"To understand what motivates their actions. Or, perhaps your assessment was incorrect, and they happen to be wise. Listening to a life story of a misfortunate fool informs you just as much as a wise man's warning."

I bowed, relenting to her words. "Would you consider yourself wise?"

She chuckled. "If wisdom can be judged by the number of foolish mistakes we've made, then yes, I am \_very \_wise."

I smiled politely. "It will be an honor to battle you, Master Agitha."

"Right to the point, then? Very well. Go, Hemlock!" A spiral of shadow made its way to the stage, grinning a familiar spiked-teeth smile with two, glowing red eyes.

I motioned to Myst with my eyes, and she took the stage.

\* \* \*

><p>[Dark Pulse, when you see an opening!] I ordered.<p>

[Very well.]

Myst and the Gengar stood on opposite sides of the dim, black arena. Hemlock cackled madly, his grin widening unnaturally across his face.

[Doesn't your kind favor illusion?] Hemlock asked. [What hubris have you to challenge me unguarded?]

[You're a ghost â€" a phantom of a soul, and an illusionary mockery of life. I don't need my own illusions to destroy you.]

Hemlock grinned, summoning a glowing orange orb in his purple palm just as Myst shot a wave of black energy. The Gengar's orb shot straight through it, hitting Myst directly and sending her to the ground.

She didn't get back up.

\* \* \*

><p>"You should know, we play for keeps here, boy." Agitha's scratchy voice echoed against the nonexistent walls. Her Gengar blew against its fingers comically, as if to blow off smoke from a gun. "Don't expect mercy from the dead."<p>

\_God. I depended on her this fightâ€|I thought she would be fasterâ€|\_

\_Options. Mew has a disadvantage. Skarr can't hit poison types, at least not well. Nova's is an average choice, but if that Gengar was faster than Myst he'll be outpaced.\_

Oxygen ground his tail against the glowing white floor, causing an eruption of sparks. [I'll fight them!]

I shook my head. [You're strong, but you're not fast enoughâ€|]

[Then who?]

\_Who else?\_

[Static.] I ordered. [You're up.]

He nodded fiercely. ['Bout time.]

Static raced to the battlefield, crackling with electricity. Hemlock glared warily, awaiting Agitha's orders.

[And Static?]

[Mmmm?]

[Kick his ass for me.] I smirked. [Thunderbolt.]

\* \* \*

><p>An explosion directly in front of me rocked me out of my complacency. Static had barely gotten in the field, meaning he was almost beside me when the Gengar attacked. I shielded my eyes and fell backwards, more out of shock than the force of the blast.<p>

Luckily, Static was significantly more nimble.

[Hey, watch it!] He yelped, dodging to the side and blasting the Gengar with a jolt of electricity. [You nearly hit my trainer, you oaf!]

[If I was aiming for your trainer, he would be a smoking pile of ash.] Hemlock swung another ball of orange energy, missing Static by inches.

[Your aim is terrible, and you're insane!] Static tensed, sending another stream of electricity into the Gengar. The ghost screamed and exploded into purple nothingness.

[â€|did we win?] Static asked. His shadow slowly crept up behind him, growing purple with a large, smug grin.

[Static!] I cried [Behind you!]

Too slow. Hemlock caught Static unawares, and smashed his fist against Static's face.

Static barely moved.

[You call \_that \_a punch?] Static laughed, blasting Hemlock again. Hemlock cringed at the blow, falling to his knees, then collapsing on the ground. [Ha. One down.]

I beamed. [Amazing job, Static. Return â€" I need you again if things go south.]

Static hopped towards the sidelines.

"Go, Haunter!"

Another purple ghost materialized in the air, laughing manically. Its tongue drooped out of its spiky paw, giving it a hysterical, insane grin.

[Ready Oxygen?] I offered.

He bounded to the stage, cracking his wrists. [Absolutely.]

\* \* \*

><p>(Oxygen POV)<p>

The moment before battle. Everything stood still for a single second; we, receiving our orders and keeping our eyes glued to our opponents, and our trainers, surveying the scene from afar. The Hunter let out a chilling cackle, raising the fur on the back of my neck.

My breath materialized before me. Steady. Caution.

[Thunderbolt.]

I dashed to the left, then the right, hoping to throw off whatever attack the Hunter was planning while trying to ensure I was close enough to attack. My entire core thundered with power, my tail swinging behind me like an old, old friend. I jumped, swinging my tail in an arc of electricity, and for a split moment, caught the Hunter's expression.

I saw its eyes.

They were all around me, trapping me, filling up the corners of my vision, and trapping me in a glaring dome. They were beneath me, above me, judging me, condemning me, all in a mixture of mocking hatred. I roared, finishing my attack, and smashing the Hunter with the flat of my tail.

I landed on two of them. They were flat and bloodshot. The Hunter collapsed to the side, barely conscious, still giggling madly. The eyes watched us both carefully.

I ran over to finish him. An enormous nail emerged right before the Hunter, which it snatched eagerly in its decapitated hands.

[\_You may win,\_] it said, [\_but my fall will be your own\_\_.\_]

And it shoved the nail between its own eyes, letting out a guttural scream before vanishing from existence.

Its eyes remained.

[Josh? Hello?] I asked. Only the eyes greeted me in turn, watching me.

Judging me.

[FIGHT ME!] I screamed, smashing my tail against the eyes on the floor, yielding no effect. I then crunched it against the wall, once again only succeeding in hurting myself. [What \_is \_this!? Fight me, don't use these cheap tricks!]

[You only needed to assk oncce.] I whipped around to see an Arbok slithering towards me, mouth dripping with venom. [What'sss gotten into you?]

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

\_Mean Look. Who teaches their Pok  mon Mean Look?\_

Oxygen looked like he was screaming something, smashing his tail against imaginary walls. His mind was elsewhere   " I couldn't speak with him, or return him to his Pok  ball.

Agitha's Arbok slunk closer, eyeing Oxygen with a cautious gaze. With the Haunter's Curse on him, I knew he wouldn't last much longer. I only had a handful of restores left  |

\_Can I afford to use one on Oxygen once this is all over?\_

He struck the Arbok. The Arbok returned his favor, sinking its teeth into his gray fur. He looked sickened now, taking the brunt of Arbok's the poison and the Haunter's Curse.

I revived Myst, biting my lip as I watched the fight unfold.

\* \* \*

><p>(Oxygen)<p>

[Auuuuugh!] I screamed as poison throbbed in my veins, and \_something stabbed through my core like a giant sword.

No, it was a nail. A huge, massive, rusty nail.

[Sseems I have my work cut out for me.] The Arbok coiled in preparation to strike. [Sssplended.]

I flipped to the side, the nail still protruding from my chest like a symbol of death. The Arbok missed and hit the business end of my tail, convulsing as a few thousand volts lit him up like a firework. He recoiled, hissing venom, and sneaked back cautiously.

I gurgled as the nail slid deeper, causing a pinkish foam to ooze out of my mouth.

\_It's only an attack. This can't kill you  |\_

My thoughts were little respite when I was physically seeing myself impaled. I coughed violently as my vision began to fade, dark spots threatening to steal away my sight.

[Here, moussey, mousse  |] the Arbok cooed from somewhere in the shadows. His natural scales hid him well against the sea of glaring eyes, and I couldn't make him out at all. My fists glowed orange in frustration.

"Boo!" he shouted behind me. I spun around and smashed my fist against a green barrier, causing it to pulse in retaliation to my strength. The Arbok merely smiled, safe within his shield.

The nail convulsed one last time. It felt like something snapped within me, causing me to lose all will to fight, to win, to be. I fell to the floor lifelessly, Haunter's words echoing in my mind.

\_My fall will be your own.\_

\* \* \*

><p>(Myst)<p>

I pushed my hair to the side angrily. Fool me onceâ€

[Ah, look. Another sssnack.] The Arbok grinned cruelly, its oversized fangs arching out of its mouth.

It blocked my first Dark Pulse. It didn't block the second.

[Good work.] Josh said.

I shot him a dubious look. [Beating a slower, weakened opponent after fainting?]

[Well. I didn't know he had Focus Blast either; that was more my fault than yours.]

[No, it was stupidity on my end.] I growled. [I should've went in with an illusion, like I always did. I was careless. It won't be a mistake I'll make again.]

[Glad to hear. Luckily the rest of this fight should be simple; I doubt she has another PokÃ©mon capable of-]

"Go, Gengar!"

Both Josh and I cursed simultaneously.

\* \* \*

><p>My illusion exploded into dust as the Gengar's focus blast reverberated across the stage.<p>

[Quick! Send me back into the PokÃ©ball!] I screamed.

[No! You can do this.]

I grit my teeth, focusing on two other illusions. There was no doubt in my mind that I could do it, only if I would be able to do it. There is a way to solve every puzzle of course, though puzzles become trickier when the punishment for a single failure is unconsciousness, and there is a rather strict time limit.

I sent a pulse of darkness at the Gengar, which caused him to violently explode into purple fragments.

[What?]

The shards reformed, but a significant portion was missing: most of his upper body, half his face, and both his arms. He stood broken, with a haunting, crooked smile.

[My turn.] He looked directly into my eyes, which should never happen when you're invisible. The Gengar opened his mouth, revealing another orange bolt.

[Quickly! Sucker Punch!]

Faster than I had ever moved before, I felt myself colliding with the broken Gengar. It wasn't already until the attack hit when I realized Josh's mistake. I had never been one for physical attacks, and I doubted my punch would do little more than anger the ghost.

My fist smashed against its form, causing the Gengar to further shatter like glass shards, splintering against the shadowed ground. I punched a hole directly in its stomach, right under most of its smile. It laughed, one last time, then collapsed in on itself, covering the ground in a pile of purple crystal.

[Itâ€¦worked?] I blinked, looking at my fist with disbelief.

[Eighty percent chance of success.] Josh smirked. [I was willing to take that.]

\* \* \*

><p>(Static POV)<p>

[All right. Let's finish this!] Electricity crackled around me, bringing the stage to life. Agitha sent out one of those purple bat things that I fought at the poison gym, way long ago.

[Standard set.] Josh smiled. Hah, how long has it been since he's said \_that?\_

"A Pikachu. Interesting." The Crobat hovered in the air. "I haven't seen your kind here before. Your trainer must be brave or a fool to be using your kind in a battle such as this."

"Fight me, you overconfident purple Twinkie!"

Faster than a bullet, the Crobat swooped down with poison trailing off his wings like fire. I smashed my paws right before he hit, causing his wings to lock up at the perfect moment. He spiraled and crashed into the stage, his wings crumpled at awkward angles.

I bolted the purple mess. Right before it hit, he shot back into the air, his previous injuries seemingly erased.

[Augh! What \_are \_you!\_] I cried, sending arcs of electricity at the purple blur, all missing by an infuriatingly small margin as he twisted and curved in the air.

[Double jointed, \_mouse!\_] He cackled, swiping my cheek with a wing.

\_Augh...\_

[Concentrate!] Josh ordered. [You're doing fine! You'll knock him out far before you'll have to worry about the poison.]

I grit my teeth, and fired another bolt of electricity at the Crobat, which it swiftly dodged. I took aim and fired again, yet a green shield deflected my blow, all while Crobat mocked me from the air.

[Isn't this \_exciting?\_] He sneered.

I could feel my body weakening as the poison took its toll. I winced, and for a split moment took my eyes off the purple bat.

He smashed into me full force, ricocheting off like some kind of insane stone. I flew backwards, catching a glimpse of him scream as electricity caused his wings to lock up in place.

[W-what!? You never hit me!] He cried, smashing into the ground again, his wings useless. I blasted him with all my electrical frustration as he convulsed helplessly in place. He stopped struggling, and collapsed unconscious.]

[Namesake] I grinned, tired yet pleased with myself. The battle was won. We did it.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

Agatha simply smiled.

"No words of wisdom?" I prompted.

She shrugged. "You already listen to those around you. One who is ignorant to others would not have beaten me. I am not so arrogant to believe that my ways are the best; If that were so I would not be third in line to the champion. I simply believe they are key in the achievement in itself."

I thought on this. All the gym leaders favored a certain type, and valued an ideal above all others. What were my ideals that I fought with? What was my strategy? Do I utilize more than one?

"Thank you." I bowed.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Josh Karren." Agatha smiled, revealing yellowish brown, rotted teeth. The arena around us faded to normal, and we appeared in a large cave entrance. Outside stood a magnificent coliseum, truly fit for a battle of the gods. Marble columns and carvings of battles complemented the aweing entrance, a massive, gothic archway. A hum seemed to fill the air; a promise of a glorious battle, at the hands of my once-idol.

"What are you waiting for?" Agatha prompted, motioning to the coliseum. "It's waiting for you."

\* \* \*

><p>Lance. Dragon <em>Master<em>. I shivered with anticipation as I walked up the coliseum's marble steps; what would it be like to battle the man I used to dream to be?

Somewhere in my pack, I still had his autographed copy of 'the field guide to PokÃ©mon', which, while it was outdated and somewhat biased, was still one of the best guides to PokÃ©mon research to date.

Static squealed beside me. [Can I go first? Do you think he'll send out Hydra? I could \_totally \_take Hydra if he sent it out!]



Hydra was Lance's Gyarados, one of his prized Pok mon. Lance was the only member of the Elite Four to go public, and his regard towards his Gyarados, along with his affinities towards dragons, caused Gyarados to be mislabeled as a water and dragon type in more than a dozen different sources. Lance was humble, but he relished the spotlight like an old friend, giving hints in battle and encouraging new trainers with tips and advice.

[Certainly.] I laughed. Static bounced in place, giggling with eagerness. [Though we'll likely have to go through another traumatic experience before facing him.]

Though my heart pounded with excitement, it was also heavy with anxiety. I had chosen to revive Oxygen, which only left me with two revives left. Lance would be a difficult battle, and the Champion would likely be even more ferocious. My resources were dwindling.

We all stepped into the coliseum. Lance sat on a throne across from us, leaning against one side with his legs comfortably crossed. His signature maroon cape draped around his shoulders, and tumbled down to the shimmering, polished floor below. He wore a pleased smile, and his arms rested slacked to his sides.

[Greetings.] Lance thought quietly, with an air of sophistication and nobility. [I am Lance, dual masters of both the Elite Four, and of Dragons themselves.]

[What about the challenge?] I blurted out.

Lance looked me over. [You're already here, aren't you? What more could I teach you that you don't already know? You've overcome every challenge before you, and stand proudly before me, ready to battle. I need no challenge to test you. I know you're worthy.]

I frowned, a bit perturbed. I was looking forward to his test. [Every other Master before you had a test, which helped show their ideals.]

Lance laughed. [Whatever ideals I hold are likely wrong, trainer, and I wouldn't want to do you the disservice of forcing them upon you.]

\_What?\_

[W-what do you mean?] I stumbled. [You're the \_Master \_of the Elite four! You can't mean you've been put here by mistake! I've seen you battle before! I've studied your strategies in school. You're a prodigy!]

Lance smiled at my praise, but shook his head. [Yet still only second in line to the best trainer in Kanto. Whatever ideals I hold, they are incomplete. If I have any lesson, it is this: Learn. Better yourself. One day, I believe I will defeat the Champion, and take her place. One day, I believe I will beat everyone, and I will not just be the Champion of Kanto, but the world.] Lance stood up, his cape sweeping behind him like a desperate fan. [But that will not be until I have mastered every detail, and refined every ideal I have into an art!]

The marble flooring splintered below us as the ground suddenly boomed

with power. A spider web of cracks demolished the smooth marble floor, and an unholy roar reverberated throughout the arena.

Lance laughed, madly. [Are you ready to begin then, trainer?]

[\_Born \_ready!] Static cried at my side, cheeks crackling in preparation. The ground shattered in a blast of foam and marble as a Gyarados reared its head, making the Onix we fought before look like a children's toy. The Gyarados was five men wide, and nearly forty feet in length, and, true to its name, had two other heads protruding from either side, each just as ferocious.

[Hydra! Use Thrash!]

[Static!] I cried, grinning manically. [Standard set!]

\* \* \*

><p>(Static POV)<p>

"Chaaa!"

"\*\*GYAAAAARAAAAAA!\*\*"

I raced to the side, as one massive head swing down, crumbling the ground, and sending me flying through the air. I latched on one of the heads spins, and it roared in anguish, trying to swallow me whole.

I smashed my paws together, in an attempt to stun the beast, but if it even moved I didn't notice. One of the other heads smashed into the first, its ten foot teeth glistening right in front of me. With one firm hand latched onto a spine, I fried the opposing head. It screamed in agony, turning black as charcoal before collapsing.

The other two heads roared in outrage. The head I was on began to death-spiral, twisting and churning like hellfire. I flew off and cracked my spine into a column, which the other head promptly obliterated with a Hyper Beam.

[Shit!] I screamed, a ten foot hole burned into the now smoking column. With nothing to support that section of the roof, it crashed down on the left head. The brilliant ceiling splintered, and the head roared, more out of annoyance than pain.

Both heads then dove at me in sync. I jumped in the air just as they both collided, the left head dazed by the blow, but the right significantly more furious than pained. I dove onto the dazed head in a split second choice, just as the right head bit into the left, swinging it like a broken arm. I flew off, then got crunched by the full brunt of the left head, and fell to the floor.

Wincing, I tried to hold my weight with a shaky paw. I felt the familiar burn of Josh's mind as it raced with calculations as I lifted myself to a low crouch. I was bad, even after just one hit.

The left head was all but out of the count. Its eyes were disoriented and pained, yet the right head looked completely unharmed.

It lunged. I dove to the left, blasting it with electricity right down its throat. The head cringed as it fried with electricity, and collapsed onto the left head. The left head sunk its teeth into the right, trying to hold the right up, but failing. At last, the entire beast fell, crumpled by its own massive weight.

I held up my fist, panting with exertion.

\_Hah. I can't believe I won.\_

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

Lance motioned to the right, and a Slowking waddled into view.

[Is that your next PokÃ©mon?]

Lance smirked. [No, he's just here for repairs. This place is \_built \_for battles, and is usually destroyed after each one. Just give him a moment.]

The Slowking pulsed with energy, and slowly, the broken coliseum began repairing itself. Stone fit back with stone, and the spider webs of cracks vanished before my eyes. The floor was now once again polished and smooth, and the ceiling wasâ€¦well, at the \_top \_of the gym again, supported now by the stable columns.

The Slowking held out a hand expectantly, and Lance dropped a large chunk of gold in its extended paw. [Thank you.]

The Slowking grunted in response, and waddled away.

Lance shot me a mischievous grin. [Usually I only pay him after battles, but it seems like you can hold your own in response to destructive tendencies. This battle's going to cost me a mint. Make it worth my time, Trainer.] Lance flipped up an Ultraball from his belt, and spun it expertly on his finger. [Go, Dragonair!]

[Go, Nova!]

## 32. How to Train Your Dragon

(Nova POV)

[Welcome to our arena, brother.] The Dragonair rose slowly, her body coiling and uncoiling in preparation for battle. [I can feel your passion, and your ferocity.]

[Brother?] I tilted my head [You see me as a Dragon?]

[I see it in your blood. It burns with the truth of my kin.] The Dragonair smirked.

[Outrage.] Josh ordered. [End this before it begins.]

\_I am Vortex.\_

The Dragonair's form began to blur, and her flawless blue skin took

on an ethereal glow.

\_I am Dragonfire. I am unquenchable, and indestructible.\_

Iridescent claws grew out of my knuckles, and my eyes took on a similar sheen. Before I could move to strike, the Dragonair vibrated violently, then struck me from halfway across the stage with its entire body. I blasted backwards, through the remade column, causing it and the ceiling to chatter like glass. A huge chunk of cement smashed into me, knocking the wind out of my lungs and trapping me under rubble.

[Get up!] Josh ordered.

With both hands, I threw the chunk of concrete off myself, and roared in frustration. The Dragonair recoiled in surprise, but not before I caught her with my claws, blasting her across the stage and two feet into the solid marble wall.

She stumbled out, dazed, but conscious.

[\*\*\_I will end you!\_\*\*] I screeched, tearing across the stage to finish my prey.

[\*\*\_As if you could!\_\*\*] She screeched in return, her eyes taking on a similar white glow. She twisted suddenly, her tail striking me in the gut with the same draconic force I had honed within myself. I crashed against the floor, my wings bent at an awkward angle.

I heard no sound.

I felt nothing, save for one, solitary thought.

**\*\*Revenge.\*\***

**\*\*For \_no one\_ slights a dragon.\*\***

**\* \* \***

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

Nova's eyes turned a terrifying red, and shards of marble rose into the air as he bellowed the deepest, most terrifying roar I've ever heard.

[Nova! Get a hold of yourself! Focus!] I commanded. I could \_feel \_my thoughts being blocked by sheer force of will; my fear was confirmed. The Outrage had taken hold.

"ZAAAH!" He howled, turning to face the Dragonair, with both his arms wielding the same iridescent glow I recognized as uncontrolled power. The Dragonair struck, yet he caught it with supernatural speed, and smashed her like a flail into the floor. She rose a meek head just to catch the back of his foot as he stomped down, finishing her for good.

He roared at Lance directly, as if to challenge his next PokÃ©mon as well.

[Nova! Return!] I commanded, but he just roared back, completely

disregarding my orders. He was wild now; unrestrained.

[If you so please!] Lance grinned, throwing out another Dragonair.  
[You surprise me, trainer! Not all are bold enough to command the  
primal forces of Dragons!]

The Dragonair was bigger than the first, and eyed Nova with a mixture  
of curiosity and condescension.

Nova charged, completely in the offensive. The Dragonair rose it's  
body and tensed, taking the full force of Nova's attack without  
moving.

[See where your foolishness has left you!] The Dragonair cried,  
opening his mouth wide and engulfing half of Nova in his open maw. He  
crunched down, shaking Nova like a rag doll before throwing him  
across the stage, and onto the cold, unforgiving floor.

He didn't get up.

\_Aughâ€|\_

I returned Nova to his PokÃ©ball, while Lance just stared heavily  
into the arena, his eyes burning with passion and intensity, matching  
the waves of his cape. His Dragonair roared, as only dragons could,  
shaking me to my core. Yet, his eyes too shone like Nova'sâ€|

[Shall we go dragon slaying?] Skarr taunted, raising an  
eyebrow.

[Indeed.] I nodded, and Skarr flew to the stage.

\* \* \*

><p>(Skarr POV)<p>

Chiiiiing!

The Dragonair ricocheted off me \_hard, \_spiraling off my body and  
smashing itself into the floor with a crazed, reddish glare. She  
howled again, a perfect, butterfly's kiss of purple leaking down her  
otherwise flawless aquian skin.

She smashed into me again, bouncing off me only to strike once more.  
[\*\*Die, damn you!]\*\*

[Feeling a bit headstrong, are we? I'll wait for you to settle back  
down.] I smirked, healing myself for the meager amount of damage I  
was taking, more out of habit than necessity. [Don't worry, I have  
all day.]

She smashed into me again, roaring loudly as my metal exterior failed  
to yield to her brute force. I scoffed as she howled, and tried  
again.

[Had enough?] I smirked, spreading my wings wide and opening myself  
up for another attack.

She faltered, wincing as the red faded from her eyes. Dragoniar  
panted, her eyes now a dull, hatred-stained pink. [\*\*Eat

hellfire.\*\*]

I spiraled out of the way, taking only a fraction of the blast of fire as they charred the floor, melting a clear hole through the thick stone. My right wing was fried, but not useless yet!

I felt another burst of heat as I curved sharply to my left, my wings scratching the ground as I took off.

Josh cheered from the slide-lines. [Feeling brave?]

[You're insane!] I cried in return, laughing senselessly. I caught the Dragoniar preparing for another gout of fire; her chest swelling unnaturally in the intake of air.

[\_Don't dodge!\_ That's your opening!]

[I can't take a hit like that!]

[You have to!]

I winced, diving downward just as she shot the next torrent of fire, and I took the attack in full. Flames burned into the red of my wings, and smoke trailed off the now burning feathers.

My burning body crunched into the Dragoniar, knocking whatever fight was left in her out. She fell to the floor, and I fell with her

[Get up.]

I tried to push myself up with a burning wing, faltered, and fell back down.

[Come on, Skarr. Don't play with me like that.]

I coughed ashes, my reddish skin burned black, glaring at Josh with a charring gaze. [Don't \_ever \_make me do that again, you fool.] I grinned, finally mustering the strength to stand.

Josh laughed victoriously. [\_That's \_the Skarr I know!]

I glided to the sidelines, watching eagerly as Lance drew another PokÃ©ball off his belt.

[Go, Aerodactyl!]

[Go, Oxygen!]

\* \* \*

><p>(Oxygen POV)<p>

[Thunderbolt!]

I swung my head around, but saw nothing to hit. The stage was devoid of anything but me, save for broken stone and shattered columns.

[What do I hit!?] I screamed back, muscles coursing with frustrated, unused electricity.

The stone around me rumbled, and two red eyes gleamed from under the rubble. I blasted the area instantly, but just as soon as I saw him, he disappeared.

[Double Team!]

I split myself in fourths with each illusion guarding a different side. The ground rumbled all around me, along with a primeval roar; a roar that shook me at an instinctual level, that told me to run, to flee, and to leave everything behind.

Like everything else, I paid it no heed.

"\*\*Face me, beast!\*\*" I screamed, tail coiled in preparation. The Aerodactyl burst from the ground, shredding two of my illusions with his saw-like teeth.

His eyes shone like blood, and gleamed with the promise of a meal yet to be consumed. "Gladly!" He bellowed, flexing his wings, the rocks around him levitating with Ancient Power, and hurling themselves like cannonballs. The first crunched against my core, knocking me prone against the fractured floor. My tail swung behind me, swirling around the second rock and lifting me up. I kicked off it and onto the third, from which I sent another blast of electricity at the winged fossil. He cringed, his eyes turning brilliant white. The sun dimmed in the sky as all the light was absorbed into the Aerodactyl, and he gave a chilling, crooked smile.

[\_Double team, NOW!\_]

A blast of white energy blasted right into me, sending me flying through the air, through the ceiling, and out of the arena itself. Out of blind instinct, my tail flung out and caught a stray ledge of the ceiling, and swung me back down, smashing me into the floor. There was a body-sized dent now with me as the main attraction sprawled out like a murder victim with my tail uselessly draped over my immobile body.

[Send out your next PokÃ©mon, trainer.] Lance prompted.

I smashed my fist into his precious polished floor to signify I wasn't out yet. My chest heaved with the effort, but I pushed myself up from the floor. Bits of light that had returned from the world began to trickle away as I glared at my foe. He was paralyzed by his attack, fatigued and forced to regain his strength after such a powerful blow.

Unable to dodge.

[Hyper Beam!]

"Raaaai!" I screamed, blasting him with the same ancestral force in anger and pure poetic justice. It tore through the rock face, and blasted into him, crumpling the once ancient beast.

"And that's how we do itâ€¦!" I panted, content at last.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

I wasn't unaware of the state of my team. Nova was knocked out, Static, Overdose, and Skarr were barely conscious, and Myst not only was at a disadvantage, but would likely also get knocked out in a single hit. I only had one Pokémon still able to hold his own; if Mew fell, it might spell the end.

I clutched one of my two remaining revives shakily in my hand. One would \_have \_to be used on Nova, should we win this battle. That left only oneâ€|

[Go, Mew!] I commanded, mind still whirring with calculations. I was glad that he was the last; though I trusted Static more, I knew what Mew was capable of. If anyone was going to be our last line of defense, I wanted it to be him.

[Impressive!] Lance leaned back in his throne, eyeing the pink Ancient. Mew curtsied, and giggled musically. [I trust this Mew was captured through trust and persuasion, and not through trickery?]

['This Mew'?] Mew tilted his entire body inquiringly. [You assume there's more than one?]

[I know your secrets.] Lance smirked back.

[You'll have to tell me sometime.] Mew flitted. [And I captured \_him\_ I'll have you know.]

[How often that happens.] Lance's eyes glazed in thought as he rubbed his fingers over his last, polished Ultraball, and then his eyes fell on me. [Dragons are sacred and legendary creatures born from the power of the Ancients. It is fitting this last dual will test how far each has come. Go, Dragonite!]

The Dragonite was large, maybe ten feet in length. She stood composed and graceful, with a knowing smirk. Unlike the others, she didn't inspire fear, though I knew logically one of those claws could take off my head.

No, the way she stood was almostâ€|elegant.

[It has been far too long since I have had the pleasure of battling worthy opponents.] Her thoughts flowed like rivers, and washed over my mind with purity that a pokespeak could not begin to equal. [It will be my honor to defeat you and your team.]

\* \* \*

><p>(Mew POV)<p>

[Ice beam!]

The ice had already shot out of my paws, and struck true at the heart of the Dragonair. I felt Josh's satisfaction as not only my attack hit, but as the Dragonair froze in place.

Then, the Dragonite simply stepped out of the ice, as if it were empty air.



[Like I said,] Lance stretched on his throne, watching the battle unfold, [I know your tricks.]

The Dragonite held up her arms, and massive draconic heads materialized into existence, each deafening my ears with their thunderous roars. She danced between the heads, seemingly absorbing their power as she flung herself through the ghosts of her ancestors.

[Ice beam again!] Josh commanded desperately.

My paws hummed with power in preparation to strike, but my body betrayed that order and convulsed in place as an unseen energy bound itself to my form.

[Aaargh!] I screamed uselessly, the ice dissolving in my paws.

[One weakness.] The Dragonite clenched its fists, her eyes glowing blue. [And everyone seeks to exploit it. You do realize I can defend myself against one attack?]

[You have more than one weakness.] I snarled, binding her with the same energy she bound me. Her eyes widened as her wings locked to her sides, and her arms flailed outside her control.

[N-no!] She cried, jerking towards me and slashing me with a multicolored claw. I blasted her back with arctic energies, and at last she fell.

I would always remember Lance's expression; the way he never looked phased through the entire battle, and the way that, when I won, he just smiled and said [Well played, trainer.]

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

[What does this mean for you?]

Lance gave me a questioning look.

[What happens now?] I asked.

[Now? You head through the final door, and face the Champion of the Elite Four. The Fifth Master, and the leader of-]

[No, for you.] I frowned. [Does this meanâ€|youâ€|lose? You lose your position in the Elite Four?]

Lance smiled a true, genuine smile. As strong and experienced as he was, he never showed an ounce of arrogance. In this, it almost seemed as if I told an amusing joke, and not as if he was laughing at my ignorance.

[No. Much like with the gyms, these trials are all heavily regulated. For me, this fight was merely for amusement, even if for you it was meant as a rite of passage. I am the last member of the Elite Four because I \_am \_the second most powerful trainer in Kanto. My PokÃ©mon â€" my dragons â€" are powerful beyond measure, but alas, I am not

permitted to use them in this area.] He shrugged. [I, much like our Champion, am restricted to using the PokÃ©mon I first fought with to gain my position, not with the PokÃ©mon I have now.]

[So, with the Champion, I'm not fighting him at his best?]

[Her.] Lance corrected. [And yes. Not even my dragons can defeat her when at full strength, but your task is only to defeat her with the PokÃ©mon she used when she first became champion. Otherwise, no one would ever usurp her.]

[Are you ready?] Lance stood from his chair, and walked beside me.

I gave him an odd look as I reached for my second-to-last revive. [Are you following me?]

[Yep. I wouldn't want to miss this fight for the world.]

[You have to root for me then.] I grinned at the thought of my life-long idol cheering for me.

[Deal.] Lance nodded, his arms crossed at his chest.

I revived Nova, and healed the others. One last, golden door stood ahead of us becoming us closer. Carved into the metal were past, glorious battles, full of narrow victories and crushing defeats. I stared at it for a long moment, mesmerized by the battles of old.

[This is it.] Static whispered quietly, his hands drooped at his sides in awe.

[We can do this.] Nova nodded.

Myst smirked. [We will do this.]

[Damn right.] Overdose ground one fist into its twin.

Skarr looked around. [Is everyone healed and ready?]

[Everyone is functioning appropriately.] Mew nodded, a touch more solemnly than normal. I pressed my hand to the door, pushing it open without even a squeak from the ancient hinges.

[Good luck.] Lance thought quietly behind us.

The room was dim, save for one, lone spotlight illuminating the middle of the room. Everything else was obscured, including the figure standing at the other end of the large, hollow chamber.

"You kept me waiting." a voice purred as she stepped forwards, the light shining off her flawless auburn skin. "You should know I don't idle well, Josh."

My legs turned weak, and I felt my brain begin to fog as it processed what I was seeing. All I could do was stare aghast at the woman in front of me, my mouth meekly whispering in quiet, confused awe, "â€¦Sandy?"

### 33. Worthy of your Demons

"That's \_Alesandra \_to you." Sandy smirked, spiraling around and flaunting her elegant maroon dress. "Who did you expect? You knew I beat the Elite Four when I was six; did you really think I had the foresight to turn down such a prestigious position as a child?"

I couldn't move. I couldn't think. How was this \_possible? \_Was all of this a ruse?

Was what we hadâ€¦a ruse?

"Come now, Josh, pick up that attractive chin of yours and stare me in the eye." Sandy pressed a finger to my jaw, forcing it upwards. "I've been waiting months for this battle; don't disappoint me now."

"Iâ€¦can't beat you." I mumbled. My PokÃ©mon shrunk back, aghast. "We've already proven this. You didn't just beat me, you destroyed me. Iâ€¦I have no chance against you."

"Complements won't get you the title of Champion." Alesandra smirked, twirling her hair. "Though they are nice to hear. And you're right; you would have no chance against me."

\_That's it then. I've lost. It's over.\_

"Luckily, you're not fighting \_me.\_"

I shot Sandy a questioning look. Behind me, I could hear Lance chuckle.

"In the same way the regulations forbade me from fighting with the PokÃ©mon I've obtained in my time here," Lance began, "They forbid Alesandra. In essence, you have to defeat her while she's using the PokÃ©mon she used to beat the Elite Four originally, all those years ago."

I turned to Lance. "So, you're sayingâ€¦"

Sandy smirked. "Yes. You have to defeat the PokÃ©mon I used when I was six, or at least the \_power levels \_of the PokÃ©mon I used."

Lance scrunched his face. "That's not accurate. You have to use the \_exact \_PokÃ©mon-"

"I'm the Champion." Alesandra laughed, catching Lance off-guard. "I can tweak the rules if I want." Lance had no comeback, and leaned against the wall, scowling. "Well, Josh? Do you think you can beat the six year old me?"

I glowered at the mask of my lover. "We'll perform our best, as always."

"Such a lack of confidence!" She scoffed, moving away from the spotlight. Tiny blue lines shone across the floor, and seemed to follow her as she moved, begging for her attention. "No goading me? No jests of how you've already bested me once, when we first met all those months ago? At least Static is growling; where are your fangs,

Josh?"

"Hubris won't get me anywhere." I spat.

"Hah!" Sandy scoffed, the blue lights pulsing at her sudden burst of sound. "Hubris will get you everywhere. Confidence is the only skill you can fake and still have, and there is more strength in pride than modesty."

"You will look glorious as your wings burn against the heat of the sun."

"A better existence than those doomed to life on the ground." Alesandra's eyes shone with the mysterious blue light across the stage. "At birth, I was doomed to the life of a shadow. How could a girl with no father possibly outshine her mother, a Brain? Left to her own devices, alone with no support?

"Because there is strength in weakness. Our vices give us more fortitude than any lone ideal, and even as a child, my pride is what got me this far. It is what forced me to battle against foes far stronger than myself, it is what allowed me to beat and claim the title of Champion, and it has secured me with power, prestige, and everything I desire, yourself included."

"I'm honored to be welcomed in your twisted power fantasy."

She smirked as I glared holes through her disgusting façade. "Unfortunately, our relationship does pose a small problem: am I emotionally inclined to let you win simply because we are romantically involved?" She moved behind some dark object, her torso barely taller than the odd, protruding shape.

"You delight in cruelty!" I balked. "You love draining the last sap of vigor from a trainer before you destroy them! You would never willingly lose a battle."

"True perhaps, but nevertheless I invited the members of the Elite Four here to act as judges to ensure that I don't show any favoritism. Fairness, and all of that." She gave me a small, condescending sneer as the blue lights shone on the floor around her feet. The light was dim, but I could make out desks towards the edges of the walls, each hosting a member of the Elite Four, save for Lance who stood by the back wall, grimacing.

"Vices are things to be fought! They blind us from truth, and harm the good that is within us. Self-growth cannot be gained until one controls their demons!"

A twisting, hydrophonic scratch echoed through the dark room, and the blue lights flickered in unison. With the burst of light, I recognized what Sandy was standing behind.

Her turntable.

"Our demons give us strength, strength to do the impossible, strength to concur whatever lies before us, whom ever lies before us." She winked before reverberating one of her disks yet again, the blue lights fluctuating in rhythm. "Face me, lover, and let us see if you are worthy of your demons! Go, Gluttony!" Alesandra commanded, an

ultraball spiraling through the air, revealing a familiar Wigglytuff.

[Just like old times, Eh?] Static grinned, his cheeks crackling in preparation for battle.

\* \* \*

><p>(Static POV)<p>

"Go, Static!"

\_Duh.\_

Wiggly was bigger than I remember. Before I was taller than her, not counting our ears, but now she was almost twice my height, nearly the size of Sandy.

She also had a pouch, just like a Chansey, filled to the brim with food and snacks.

[Fighting set!] Josh commanded. [Just like the first fight. No mercy!]

Just as commanded, I raced up and smashed my paws together, stunning the giant mass of pink fluff. My fist followed, smashing her in the chest.

Her chest absorbed the blow, and she didn't move.

[Hahaha!] She laughed, grabbing a bag of chips from her pouch and downing the entire thing in one, massive gulp, plastic and all. [I'm not the weakling you use to know, Statie!]

She ballooned in size again, dwarfing Sandy, and grinning at me with now massive seafoam eyes. [Come get me, mousey mouse!]

I kicked off the floor and slugged her in the stomach, but she used my momentum to catch me, and thump me with her other stumpy paw.

\_Thwack!\_

[Hah!] I snorted, [You call that a-]

\_Thwack!\_

[Aah, okay, m-maybe-]

\_Twack!\_

She hit my muzzle hard that time, snapping my neck backwards, and causing my vision to blur. I couldn't escape her grasp, or fail to notice her seafoam eyes had turned a sickly shade of red.

\_Twack!\_

[W-Wigglyâ€¦] I winced, [Why? Don't you want us to win? Don't you want us to be together, Josh with Sandy and me with you? Stop

thisâ€|]

[That's the thing about gluttony, Stat.] her hollow voice echoed inside my mind, [I can't stop.]

\_Twack!\_

With the last blow she released me, and I tumbled across the stage dazed, my vision threatening to give with black spots fading in and out of view and stealing bits of sensation. Was I standing? Had I already fainted?

[S-static, return!]

Half-numb, I stumbled back to Josh and leaned against his leg for support, panting heavily. Wiggly looked like she hadn't even been hit, and laughed at my condition from across the stage.

[What's wrong, Josh?] Sandy cooed, a low, modulated bass humming behind her. [Not going to finish what you've started?]

[I'mâ€|sorryâ€|] I attempted to transmit.

Josh shook his head. [Don't be. You did your best; it's not your fault. Don't worry â€" it's far from over.]

Wiggly gave Josh a wide, unnerving smile. [Who's next for me to squish, Joshy-Josh?]

[Go, Skarr!] Skarr nodded curtly and zoomed to the stage.

[Awww.] Wiggly sighed, her arms drooping. [You're no fun.]

Skarr matched her demented smile, drawing a poisoned feather like a switchblade. [I'm going to pop you like the crazed blimp you are.]

\* \* \*

><p>(Skarr POV)<p>

Wigglytuff bashed her foot into me, violet venom dribbling down the slice in her brow. I flinched and healed myself just as another paw crunched into my core, doubling me over and forcing me into the air.

For a moment, the battlefield was still. Wigglytuff reached inside her pouch and grabbed a fistful of some type of sticky pastry and shoved it down her maw, the wounds of poison closing on her fur. The poison wouldn't go away that easily, but it would buy her time.

Time I wasn't sure I had.

[Josh!] I thought over the electronic reverberation of Sandy's music, [I can't heal! She-]

[I know. Keep to the air â€" you'll have the advantage.]

I swooped higher. Wiggly continued eating, growing even more immense as she gorged herself on a mixture of food and air. It was terrifying

â€ the more she ate, more elastic she became, and at any moment I was sure she could just float up and sock me in the jaw with that attack.

[Land and heal yourself, then attack her with Fly!] Josh commanded.

\_I'm not sure I'll be able to take another punch from the groundâ€|\_

I landed and instantly healed myself, and I noticed what Josh saw. Wiggly wasn't growing to destroy me, she was eating just to stay alive. She could gorge herself enough so that the poison wouldn't consume her, but that's all she could do. If she attacked me, she risked fainting as well.

"Yah!" She screeched, seeing an opening and trying to take me down with her. I was faster, and swooped into the air with a riskily-gained second-wind. She had wasted her healing opportunity trying to attack me, and she would pay for it dearly.

"Skraaaaaaaaa!" I cried, diving at her from the air and slicing her with my steel wings. It wasn't much, but it was enough. She toppled belly-up, her eyes vacant and deflated.

[Think you can do another round?] Josh asked.

[Definitely.] I nodded.

Sandy shook her head disdainfully and plucked her second ultraball of five from her belt. [Go, Wrath!]

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

Her Infernape rattled, agitated with the lack of orders. It was the same Infernape I had used to fight against her, a few months prior. Its eyes darted back and forth with a crazed intensity, barely restrained rage. Her hands clenched with fire, blazing with mastery as she silently convulsed in place.

[Skarr, use To-]

Wrath blind-sided Skarr in a blur of motion, smashing her feet together causing Skarr to flinch backwards, then comboing into a series of blazing punches and kicks. Skarr's wings flashed with venom, but Wrath pushed his wings aside, impervious to Skarr's attempts at escape. The entire battle took seconds. Skarr lost consciousness half way through the slaughter, and crumpled to the floor once the Infernape chose to stop punching.

Wrath sighed, not even close to sated. Her eyes burned into me, as if to challenge me personally to battle. She looked ferocious and uncontrolled, but she wasn't the only one that could harness that ferocious, blazing energy.

[Go, Nova!]

\* \* \*

><p>(Nova POV)<p>

"Innnnferno!"

"\*\*\_Zaaaah\_\*\*!" I roared back, flaring my wings. [Outrage, Josh?]

[Fly! You have an advantage; use it!]

I lunged off the ground just as the Infernape leapt to strike me, her fists missing my inches. I twisted in a loop and dove, striking the Infernape at her core and flipping her backwards.

[Excellent! Now use Dragon Pulse!]

She caught herself on her hands, springing backwards and pounded me with her feet. I stumbled backwards, wincing while blasting a torrent of white-hot dragon fire.

Sidestepping the flame, she turned and bashed her foot into my face, disorienting me further while knocking me to the ground. I bellowed another gout of dragon flames as she bounded into the air, my flames blasting her out of the sky and denting the opposing steel wall with her body.

Josh nodded, a smile on his face I hadn't seen in a while. I remembered the first fight with the Onix, with the Pikachu, and the fights at the grass gym, that look of approval, of happiness, of pride.

[You did it, Nova.]

I did it. I forgot about Vortex; this was just me and Josh against the Champion, and I held my own.

[Yeah.] I tittered in return, blinking in slight disbelief.

[I'm going to need you to continue fighting. I won't be disappointed if you faint, I just need you to get damage on the next PokÃ©mon.]

[Okay!] I nodded confidently.

"Go, Greed!" Sandy commanded, sending out a short, unnaturally thin PokÃ©mon with glittery, gemstone eyes and twitchy purple limbs.

\* \* \*

><p>I didn't need an order to know what to do next. Rage washed over my mind as I felt my draconic heritage mesh with my physical body, augmenting my corporeal being with ancient potency.<p>

I lunged at the purple demon, but the Sableye scoffed and melded into nothingness, reappearing behind me and socking me in the back of the neck. My rage slipped my mind as my face met the tiled floor, cracking the linoleum in a wave of synthetic bass.

My wings jerked me off the ground, and I spun and struck the gem-eyed monstrosity. He took the attack in full. Gems spilled out of his



mouth as he laughed, seemingly impervious to my swirling, prismic claws. I swiped at him again, but once more he phased out of existence.

The Sableye stuck me again, and a feeling of atrophy and disorientation flowed through my being.

I roared in frustration, standing purely by my inhuman draconic will. [How can I hit it!?] I screamed, missing once again what should've been a debilitating blow. [It keeps teleporting!]

[You have-] I startled Josh with a brutal thwack, interrupting the Sableye teleport by slashing it across the chest, and spilling small precious stones all across the floor. [It.]

[Return.] Sandy smirked, returning the unconscious Sableye to its Pokéball.

[Return.] Josh nodded at me. I stumbled to his side, sapped of all resolve. He looked down at me and smiled. [You were amazing out there.]

[Yeah,] I laughed, finally believing him. [Thanks.]

\* \* \*

><p>(Myst POV)<p>

[Go, Sloth!]

[Go, Myst!]

An Alakazam rested on his chest, twirling a spoon idly between his fingers. My fur bristled as illusions danced out of my form, daring the Alakazam to guess which was real.

[Child,] Sloth scoffed, [As if a mere misguidance could deter a mind such as mine.]

One of my illusions cast a black hand of shadow at the Alakazam, but she ignored it and instead blocked my actual attack â€" a Dark Pulse I had cleverly disguised as just another throb of blue light. Her spoon vibrated with energy, absorbing the blast, and redirecting it back at me as a stream of repugnant emerald energy.

I growled in pain, my illusions vanishing with my lack of concentration. Sloth merely smirked, twirling her spoon with passive, apathetic eyes.

I took a breath and extended my mind, allowing my illusions once again to flood the battlefield. Sloth gave a condescending snort, gazing at her spoon with weary indifference.

[The spoon, Myst!] Josh implored, [Concentrate on the spoon!]

\_The spoon. \_I saw my eyes inside it and \_only \_my eyes. I didn't extend my illusions into the spoon itself; that's how she knew!

I quickly created another illusion in the spoon, and dodged a blast of variant energy that would have meant my doom.

The Alakazam grimaced, clutching her spoon and cleansing it of my influence. [You think your flitting phantasms can have any effect on a mind as powerful as mine? Your make-believe and misdirection may work on others, but trifling shadows have never held a place amongst the gods!]

[I'll happily be the first, then.] I chuckled theatrically, the lights dimming with each resounding beat. Sloth looked around wildly, only seeing a glimmer of reality within her spoon, and shot bursts of green energy randomly into my darkness. I scoffed, ensuring the sound resounded around the arena.

Sloth stood, gazing at the spoon's reflection with a sense of dread. I kicked it out of her paw, and smashed my fist into her throat. My shadow fades away, no longer needed with my foe vanquished.

[Excellent work, Myst.]

I smirked, my tail whipping behind me as I walked to the sidelines. [Would you have expected any less?]

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

\_No reason to stop this streak. Let's end this in style.\_

[Go, Mew!]

Mew coiled off my wrist and melded onto the battlefield in a whip of pink slime. He beamed, disorienting the air in a show of prowess before adopting a battle stance.

The music stuttered before resuming its normal rhythm. I glanced up at Sandy and saw her eyes glistening, pain written into her face.

\_I neverâ€|assumed she was a sore loser?\_

[Areâ€|you alright?] I asked, prodding her thoughts with my own.

She glanced up, tears gone, but pain still cracking through her near-perfect faÃ§ade. "So close. Gods, I thought you had it. It wouldn't have been a complete victory, not a 6-0, but you still would have won." She winced, clutching her turn table, her knuckles white. "Good game, Josh Karren. Maybe in another day." Her voice cracked, and she switched to Poke-speak. [Go, Envy.] Sandy continued, sending out her last PokÃ©ball, which melted in her hand. A similar pink ooze made its way to the battlefield, taking the form of Mew.

She sighed, staring me with the look of someone who has made an impossible choice, and spoke two words that will dwell in my nightmares forever.

"Finish him."

(Mew POV)

[Urrrâ€¦]

By all probability this match should have ended in a tie. It should have ended with a mortal striking down a god, but the god's retribution ending the mortal as well. Envy being the heroic flaw that ended this fight; after all, I knew all his weaknesses. He was me; I was him. I had more prowess in this body, I knew its function and its power.

Why was I the one that fell?

Juice glimmered off the maw that wasn't mine as I lay in the quiet state before complete obscurity, but after obvious defeat. I felt a foot drive itself into my back; my own paw set to betray me.

[You are god of nothing.]

I was too exhausted to respond to Envy's taunt. Too exhausted to think, to speak, to be. Darkness consumed me, the blessed mercy of unconsciousness being the incomprehension of one's own failings.

That I had single-handedly doomed them all.

[Fun body. Let's take it out for a spin.]

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

\_Oh. God.\_

I realized the mistake I had made as soon as she sent out the Ditto, but what I hadn't seen was the Citrus berry hidden on the Ditto, which made the Ditto take his hits \_slightly \_better, and thus be just \_slightly \_faster than my Mew, which is all the difference that was needed.

He had over half health.

He had all of Mew's moves.

He was stronger than every PokÃ©mon on my team.

I took a breath, and calmed my thoughts. Stronger, perhaps, but faster, and not at an advantage. No, I was the one that still had that.

[Go, Myst!]

\* \* \*

><p>Myst's body crunched against the wall, collapsing to the floor. The Ditto laughed aloud, paw smoking from the flame it had just conjured. [Come now, Trainer. From Alessandra's complements I had expected more.]<p>

[Stop, Envy.] Sandy's detached, chilled thoughts echoed in our minds.

[This isn't the time.]

The fake Mew sulked, crossing his paws. [As you wish, Master.]

[Nova, go.] I commanded. He looked at me with horror "I knew he would not be able to endure another hit. Maybe I thought he was faster. Maybe I thought he could dodge before getting a blow. It didn't matter " his body fell just like Myst's.

[It takes the enjoyment out of combat when I'm not allowed to mock my competition.] Envy laughed, tossing Nova's body at my feet like a ragdoll. [Where's your sense of \_adventure\_? Where's the cruel and lovely Alessandra I've come to trust and love?]

[Just do your damn job.] Sandy glowered.

\_Two PokÃ©balls left, and one reviveâ€|\_

[What are you waiting for?] Oxygen snarled. [Send me out!]

I had no plan. [Iâ€|justâ€|]

[Josh, come on.] Static encouraged. [You can do this. We believe in you.]

\_Oxygen goes out with the Focus Sash. He hits Ditto with a Hyperbeam before fainting. Static goes out and uses Fake Outâ€|but that won't be enough.\_

\_Static goes out. Fake out, then faints. Oxygen buys time while I use the restore on Static, then Oxygen faints. I give Static the Focus Sash, he uses Fake Out then thunderbolt, but stillâ€|\_

\_I send Oxygen out to revive Mew, then Oxygen faints. I give Static the Focus Sash, then he uses Fake Out. On the second turn, I heal Mew back to full health. Static faints. Mew is back at full health to finish Ditto off, butâ€|\_

\_â€|but that will be Mew's victory. Not Static's.\_

I rubbed my temple, contemplating the different, equally poor strategies. This wasn't how it was meant to happen. It needed to end with Static by my side, healthy and alive, and us both going into the Hall of Fame together, as one. That was our dreamâ€|

[Iâ€|can't.] I winced, grimacing at Static. [There's no way where I can win with you being conscious. I don'tâ€|want to win without you. This is as much your dream as it is mine! I can't walk to the Hall without you. I can't beat Sandy without you. If that means losing, I mean, we can always try again. There's no rule against-]

[\_Are you **\*\*serious!?!\*\***\_] Static cried, his fists balled at his sides. [You want me to give you the 'there's no 'I' in team' speech **\*\*now\*\***!? I don't care how we win, Josh, whether it's me giving all I have or me waking up in a hospital bed! What matters is you \_winning\_ this, \_and making this whole journey \_worth it!\_ I don't care if I faint, just make sure \_we\_-] Static motioned to me, to Nova and Myst, to Mew and Skarr, and to Oxygen. [Win. As a \_team.\_]

I nodded slowly, exhaling. [Okay. I know what to do.]

[I know.] Static smirked, almost as if that cocky grin had never left his face. [Now just \_do \_it.]

[Go, Oxygen!] I commanded, Oxygen bounding to the field with a crazed, violent grin. [Buy us time.]

[I'll do more than that.] Oxygen nodded, vigorously cracking his paws.

\* \* \*

><p><p>

(Oxygen POV)

Double Team!

One of my duplicates was snared by the Ditto's telekinetic wrath, crunching it very realistically and tossing it aside. I ducked under another telekinetic scythe, whirling my tail at the fictions god. A six foot translucent fist clenched around my chest, but my tail still swung true, smashing Envy in its core.

My eyes widened as my tail betrayed me, its electricity bounding up my leg and locking my muscles in place. The transparent arm squashed me in its grip, twisting awkwardly and throwing me to the ground.

\_Not betrayal. It's the Mew's trickery!\_

I hoisted myself off the glowing azure floor, paws clawing at the unnatural light. I knew I wasn't meant to survive that blow; the Ditto's face told me that much.

[I've healed Mew!] Josh exclaimed. [Hit him with everything now! Hyper Beam!]

The blue light shimmered beneath me as I charged my attack, my mouth glowing with the sapphire energy. Envy rose its hand to defend against me, but the paralysis proved too much and bound it in place.

Enough for one, perfect shot.

"\*\*Raaaai!\*\*" I howled as a blast of energy shattered into the fake Mew, whirling off its body in a blast of brilliance. It shielded itself with jerky palms, but the force of the attack proved too much, and forced him to the ground.

But he wasn't out yet. With one, shaking paw, he sent a burst of psychic power. I couldn't move " I couldn't dodge after an attack like that " and it struck me without deviation, sending me sliding across the ground.

My last thought before going under wasn't anger, or thoughts of revenge. It wasn't self-pity, or disgust. As the thoughts drained from my mind, I was content.

[Return, Oxygen. You've been amazing; more than I ever could have hoped!]

Because now, my \_team \_could win.

\* \* \*

><p>(Static POV)<p>

[\_Standard set! \_Send these sins back to the hell they've from!] Josh thundered, with a violent smile erupting across his face. I was happy to comply, a smile matching his carved across my face, nearly stretching to the streams of electricity coiling from my cheeks. Orange energy churned from my paws as I raced to finish Envy, and win the title of Champion for Josh, with our names carved in glory next to his, written forever in unchanging, permanent stone.

My muscles contracted fiercely, nearly causing me to lose my balance as I bounded across the stage, and I howled with confusion and pain.

[It stole Mew's ability!] Josh hollered from the sidelines, making sense of the constricting current racing around myself. It didn't matter â€" this was how it was meant to be. Focus Sash trailing off my head like a fighter, soaking away my insecurities as I raced towards victory, the first Pikachu in history to \_ever \_make it this far.

The Mew stopped me in midair, holding me in place inches in front of his face, and smirked. Envy's eyes were a desaturated navy, drained of all life.

[How cute,] It cooed, giving a stale smirk as it held me in place, [How does it feel to be on the same stage as us, mouse? Tell me, does your blood boil as your body fails, over and over again? It isn't your fault â€" not everyone can be as naturally gifted as us.]

I tried to growl, but I was frozen in place. The Mew laughed, lifting me further into the air before throwing me at the ground, squashing me against the linoleum.

I felt myself crunch into the floor. I knew it was over then â€" with as much experience as I had, I knew my limits. This was too much, and I was done.

Yetâ€|like some sick bungee cord, I felt myself snap back into focus, my mind wracked with fatigue, and my muscles burning with exhaustion. I heard the Mew laughing, no doubt content with its latest victory. I lifted myself out of the crater in the ground with one paw, and with the other grabbed a tuft of the Mew's fur and pulled it to my cheek.

[To hell, and back again.] I spat, giving ever last millivolt of electricity I had into that spiteful, passive aggressive piece of pink slime. It screamed, collapsing in on itself with a splatter and pooling into goo with a smooth, liquidly synth echoing off the walls.

Sandy stood up, removing her hand from the turn table with a tired, content smirk. I collapsed to the floor, my Focus Sash turning to

dust, yet I held a single paw upwards in victory.

[We did it, Static.] Josh whispered, in quiet awe.

[Did you ever doubt us?] I smirked in reply.

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

Sandy beamed, thrusting her hand towards the judges. "Does anyone contend that I battled to the fullest extent of my abilities, or otherwise showed favoritism to the Champion?"

\_Champion. Oh god, I could get used to that.\_

Agatha leaned back in her chair, her old bones creaking to her odd posture. "A legitimate victor."

Lorelei gave a reluctant nod. Bruno's was much more fierce and meaningful.

"And you, Lance?" Sandy asked.

"Does it matter?" Lance shrugged, his eyes showing a careful ambivalence as his cape draped behind him. "Even if I held any ill will towards this fight, my opinion would be overruled."

"I would still prefer you be on my side, if purely for symbolic reasons." I squeaked, my heart still racing in my chest. "You've always been a h-huge influence to me, and-

"I believe the battle was flawed." Lance interrupted. "Though it was her right, I believe it disrespectful to violate the rules of Elite Combat simply because it fit her mood." Lance looked up at Sandy, clearly dissatisfied. "Though, this breach of conduct would only serve to make the challenger's trial more difficult, so to Josh I say: yes. Your victory was legitimate."

I didn't know what to say. Or do. I was an idiot; half my PokÃ©mon were unconscious right now! They couldn't share in this moment!

"Um," I gulped, "I-is there a place I can revive my PokÃ©mon, for-"

"You're looking for the Hall of Fame." Sandy smiled. "That would be right behind you."

I turned to see a brilliant entranceway of swirling blue light beckoning me further. This was it.

I took my first step.

"Before you goâ€¦" I turned to Sandy, who gave a long, tired smile. "You have a choice, Josh Karren."

"Oh?"

"You have won. You have earned the right of Champion; the strongest

trainer in Kanto." Sandy waved her arm as if to drape it all across the country. "But will you keep it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Whatever you decide, you will keep the rank of Champion. You will be able to live and purchase property in the Battle Park, along with your Pok  mon and extended family."

"What is the choice?" I asked suspiciously.

"The choice is if you wish to maintain the rank of the Champion of Kanto. This position holds many responsibilities, including flying down here anytime a challenger should arise. You must train vigilantly, and you may not own or live outside Kanto's borders."

I frowned. "But you live at the Battle Park."

"I was an exception, as I also own the title of a Brain." Sandy explained. "Without you holding both positions, you will be required to stay here, in Kanto. That is, if you choose not to refuse."

'\_Is that what drives you? The need to be the best?\_' Skarr's voice echoed in my mind. '\_Why travel. Why reach the peak?\_'

\_'For the companionship of those I climb with,' \_I answered, way back when.\_ 'And for that view when we all succeed.'\_

"Keep it." I smiled. "You're better company than all the prestige in the world."

-Epilogue, Three Months Later-

(Josh's POV)

I didn't know if my eyes were open or closed. How many sleepless nights had I endured, staring at a ceiling I couldn't see? It wasn't that the bed was uncomfortable; it couldn't be. It was made from Altaria down, a substance \_made \_for sleep.

\_But then  |why can't I sleep?\_

I had everything I wanted. My Pok  mon were content. Sandy was sleeping beside me. I had made peace with my parents, as much as I could. I even got a hug from my mother.

\_I wish I could just roll over, but I'd wake Sandy  |\_

Weeks of battling. I enjoyed each one, and with it, a rush of life and brilliance. I saw the spark in Static's eyes as we fought harder and harder opponents. He loved it here. Nova loved it here. Myst, Skarr, Mew. I almost thought of Oxygen, but  |he wasn't with us anymore. I would like to believe that he was just like Skarr, that, someday, he would return.

Someday.

\* \* \*

><p>(Oxygen POV)<p>



\_Had the nights always been this cold?\_

I shivered, coated in the silence of a moonless night. Had it really been so long since I claimed dominion in this city? Now who was I? A Raichu without a trainer, cold, and alone.

I still recall Josh's face. Not disappointment, not really. He knew it was coming. More like a sad realization. The conscious awareness that the cancer would kill you, not knowledge of the cancer itself. Where the patient has time to acknowledge his unseen parasite, and make peace with death far before his time.

[Are you sure?] Josh choked, staring at me with all the love I never deserved.

[I told you I would leave. Make a name for myself. Make some money for charity; redeem myself. Why are you so surprised?]

[I'm not. Good for you, Ox.] Josh's voice cracked. He couldn't care for me, not really. I had tried to kill Static. I had tried to kill \_him\_. Why was he blinking back tears? [I'm proud of you.]

[I'll come back.] The words tumbled out of my mouth as tears blurred my vision, and the lump in my throat threatened to strangle any last words from my pained, broken face. [Someday, Josh. Someday when I can look at myself without hatred, someday when I feel like I've done more good than harm. When I feel as if my life was worth living again.]

[You don't have to be defined by your past.]

[Someday when I believe that.] I laughed, pained, tears spilling down my face. He offered his arms and I bounced into them, hugging him fiercely despite never hugging anyone ever before. It was wonderful, just like I imagined it would be.

[I wish you all the luck in the world.] Josh hugged me just as fiercely.

[And I wish you double.] I sniffed, [Take care of Static for me, will you?]

\* \* \*

><p>(Josh POV)<p>

And just like that, he was gone. Legend hunting.

\_Is that why I can't sleep? Because I miss him?\_

Legend hunting. A career for the brave and foolish, hunting dangerous and potent Pokémon for gold, mostly for study. Typically it was catch and release, but in some occasions it was for human or even Pokémon safety. It's a risky job, but no one else knows how to tame or capture a raging Gyarados, especially one near the Battle Park several times its normal size.

\_Maybe I'm just thirsty.\_

I sat up slowly, trying not to wake Sandy. I stealthily crept to the side of the bed, leaning down on the smooth, tiled floor. A hand lashed out and grabbed my wrist, squeezing it with need and ache.

"Please." Sandy whispered, her expression unreadable in the room's dim light. "Don't go."

"I'm just going to grab some water." I cooed, gently pulling Sandy's wrist from my own. "Okay? Don't worry â€" go back to sleep."

"â€|Okayâ€|" Sandy mumbled, reaching out for my nonexistent body on the bed, no longer there. She shifted uncomfortably.

I got my water and returned to bed, gently easing my way back in. Sandy turned to me, her eyes half-lidded with just a gleam of lucidity as her arm found my chest, and curled against it.

"Are you leaving?"

"No, Sandy. I'm right here." I whispered.

\_Twice in one night? Had she been having nightmares?\_

"No. I mean, the Battle Park. Are you going away?"

"No. I'm staying right here." I reassured her, cupping her waist in my palm. "Don't worry."

She shifted, frowning. "You should. You should go."

\_Huh?\_

"Josh," Sandy started, pulling herself closer to me, "You're miserable here. You haven't slept in days. Being cooped up in this apartment isn't good for you."

"You're good for me." I countered.

"You don't sleep. Your PokÃ©mon are only happy when they're battling; otherwise they don't know what to do. None of them are acclimated to the city. All this freedom you had, all this travelâ€|and now you're stuck. I couldn't blame you for feeling smothered."

"I don't feel smothered. I don't feel like I have a lack of freedom, I just-"

"Look at me." Sandy implored, opening those beautiful, reflective dark orbs. "Josh, I know you. I'm not mad. Look deep within yourself â€" if you could do anything right now, what would it be?"

"You?" I tried, smirking awkwardly.

Sandy pushed me away annoyed. "I'm serious."

"â€|I would be a Legendary Hunter." The words left my mouth like I had known them all along. Months of sitting doing nothing hadn't curbed my desire to travel, to see everything the world had to offer,

to go wander around trees and forests, lakes and cities. I knew it suddenly; I was struck with incurable wanderlust, a desire to see everything, go everywhere, and I couldn't do it in this stifling city.

Wanderlust. I could suppress it. I could hold it down; my affliction wouldn't get in the way of my relationship. I loved her. I loved her more than all the sites the world had to offer, and all the battles and trophies I could ever earn.

"I won't make you choose." She whispered, her words slowed and sleepy as her eyelids fell. "Go."

"I won't leave you."

"Damn right you won't." Sandy grinned, pulling me into an embrace. "We'll see each other as often as we can. But you need this. And I understand. I'll help you pack in the morning."

Just like that, the decision was made. I felt relieved; Sandy knew it better than I that I needed this. More than freedom, I needed the support of knowing I could have both, my love of travel and my love of the beautiful woman sleeping next to me. At last, I knew I could rest.

"Thank you." I murmured, hugging Sandy lightly while drifting to a much needed sleep, a grin on my face as I dreamed of adventures to come.

**\*\*THE END\*\***

End  
file.